天地無用！魎皇鬼

諸行無常編(下)

長谷川菜穂子

イラスト　大和田直之

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki

The Impermanence of All Things (Part 2)

By Naoko Hasegawa

Novel 2

Machine Translated and Edited by
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For more: visit tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

Chapter Nine:

One Day as Autumn Deepened...

One day, as autumn deepened...

Ryoko was sprawled out on the second-floor roof—more accurately, atop some futons put out to dry—absorbing the solar heat along with the fabric.

Tenchi was away tending to the fields. Sasami had apparently gone out to play with Ryo-Ohki as her companion, so she was also absent. As for Ayeka, while it was unclear what she was doing holed up in her room, she was nowhere to be seen. Of course, Nobuyuki, the head of the household, was away at work. To put it simply, there was currently not a single soul around to disturb Ryoko's peace.

Having just finished lunch, the warmth of the Okayama sunshine caused her eyelids to droop naturally. Ryoko let out a massive yawn that looked ready to split her jaw, realizing that this must be the exact pleasure a cat feels napping on a veranda. She gazed idly at the laundry fluttering in a light breeze in a corner of the yard.

It had been seven hundred years since she was sealed in the shrine, and though Ryoko had only just begun her second life, her daily routine actually consisted of living like a retired old man.

"Being alone like this with Tenchi is pretty nice," she mused.

Because no one was around to interfere, Ryoko had completely forgotten about the existence of everyone else. In her mind, a scene played out like a movie: an elderly couple sitting side-by-side on a veranda, sipping astringent tea while admiring a magnificent bonsai.

"Hey, Tenchi~," Ryoko said in a sweet, coaxing voice.

"What is it, dear?"

A Tenchi dressed in traditional Japanese clothing and sporting a mustache replied, looking every bit the established head of a household.

"A lot has happened, but we finally managed to be together like this, didn't we?"

"That’s true. Ayeka and Sasami went back to their home world, Dad gave this house to me, and Grandpa is already in his grave..."

(Hey, hey, Ryoko! Don't go sending people home or killing them off as you please!)

"It's just the two of us in this big house, isn't it?" Ryoko’s delusions were forceful.

"That’s right, Ryoko." Suddenly, Tenchi pulled her close by the shoulder. "I think it’s about time I had an heir."

"Eh? ...An heir?"

Tenchi’s hand parted the front of Ryoko’s kimono, and as she looked up, his lips softly covered hers.

"A child. Our child..."

"Oh, Tenchi..."

Just as Ryoko’s delusion reached its climax, the telephone rang loudly.

"Ugh... and right at the good part, too..."

Ryoko sat up on the futon and checked the state of the house. Ayeka, who was supposed to be inside, showed no sign of answering. She could have ignored it, but acting on a vague hunch, Ryoko decided to take the call.

"Hello, Masaki residence... Oh, it’s just you, Pops," Ryoko said the moment she heard Nobuyuki’s voice. She had teleported to the phone in the living room; her abilities were quite convenient when used practically.

"Calling me 'just you' is a bit harsh. Is Tenchi there?" Nobuyuki was calling from his office, as the background noise of the workplace reached Ryoko’s ears.

"Tenchi’s at the carrot patch, but what do you want?" Ryoko was in a bit of a foul mood after having her fantasy interrupted.

"Actually, work has settled down, so I was thinking of going to a hot spring."

"A hot spring?"

"A relative of mine—an old lady—runs the place. I thought it would be a good chance to, you know, deepen our bonds... By the way, do you even know what a hot spring is?"

"I know that much. Back in the day, they used to call me 'Ryoko the Hot Spring Terror.' I used to wreck famous historical sites and ruins all over the place."

"Wh-when exactly was this?" Nobuyuki replied, sounding flustered.

"When I was a space pirate, of course," Ryoko answered, recalling various hidden hot springs across the universe. "After all, everyone’s naked when they go into a hot spring. No matter what kind of alien or rich person they are, nobody’s stupid enough to bathe in heavy armor. That’s when I’d show up to loot their valuables, blackmail them, and extort them to my heart’s content. And if I barged into the men’s bath, I had my pick of the handsome ones or the rugged ones... What’s wrong, Pops?"

There was a stunned silence from the other end of the line, followed by a panicked voice.

"H-hey, Ryoko! Don't talk about that kind of thing over the phone! Besides, that’s not why we’re going. Didn’t I just say? It’s a place run by a relative. I’m not taking kids who can’t behave. Got it?"

Suddenly, a hand reached out from the side and snatched the receiver away.

"Yes, Uncle. Thank you very much. I shall relay the message clearly to Lord Tenchi. Please, pay no mind to what that stray cat says..."

"Who are you calling a stray cat?" Ryoko snapped, after having the phone yanked away by Ayeka.

"...Well then, please take care. We shall be waiting for your return."

Ayeka ignored Ryoko, quietly hung up the phone, spun around, and glared sharply at her.

"I stood by and listened, and what a vulgar display! Even though Uncle was kind enough to offer to take us to a hot spring, can you not manage a proper response?"

Ryoko flared up. "Then you should've just answered the damn phone yourself! No one was picking up, so I was being helpful, and then you just grab it away... You were eavesdropping in the back, weren't you?"

Ayeka laughed with a look of disdain. "I have made it a point not to answer calls that might be from tradesmen or salesmen. When I was at the Juraian Royal Palace, such

tasks were handled by the servants. The only ones who called me directly were my Father, Mother, or Tsukimaro, the Captain of the Royal Guard. Well, I suppose explaining such things to a commoner like you is a waste of time."

Ayeka covered her mouth with her sleeve and let out a refined "Ho-ho-ho" laugh.

"At any rate, you should study how to speak properly. If you keep using such barbaric language, Lord Tenchi will grow to dislike you."

"....."

Struck where it hurt, Ryoko was momentarily speechless. Taking advantage of the silence, Ayeka made her way upstairs. Behind her, Ryoko trembled with rage, but then her eyes suddenly gleamed as if she had thought of something.

"...Just you wait. I'm going to strip that arrogant mask right off your face. You look forward to it."

An instant later, Ryoko vanished. The old-fashioned wall clock in the living room chimed three o'clock into the now-silent house.

Back in her room, Ayeka was in high spirits, humming to herself as she opened her closet. She began pulling out one expensive outfit after another.

"I wonder which one would be best... Since I am going out with Lord Tenchi, it would be strange if I dressed up so much that I looked out of place beside him... but I cannot dress in a way that is unbecoming of my status..."

Muttering to herself, Ayeka selected about ten outfits and laid them on the tatami mats, then pulled out delicate lingerie to match from another drawer.

The clothes were all kimono-style, reaching down to the ankles. Perhaps following the traditions of the Juraian Royal Family, they were all vibrantly colored in shades like deep crimson, ancient purple, and ultramarine. Ayeka stood before a full-length mirror and began her one-woman fashion show.

Juraian Royal attire began with an all-in-one bodysuit, over which a sleeveless under-kimono as thin as a mayfly's wing was worn. An ordinary man would likely find

the way the body's lines were visible through the translucent fabric quite alluring—even more so if the bodysuit underneath weren't there.

In any case, the waist of the under-kimono was tied with a cord, and an inner garment was worn over it. This closely resembled a standard kimono, though it differed slightly in that the sleeves were loose and cylindrical. These inner garments were usually solid colors, but featured complex woven patterns that created play of light and shadow. The patterns typically depicted plants associated with the Juraian Royal Family or geometric leaf designs. Finally, a long, sleeveless outer garment resembling a surcoat was added, and a sash was tied over it to complete Ayeka’s everyday attire.

The outer garments featured vivid color combinations and were often heavily embroidered, encrusted with jewels, or featured delicate cutwork. They were, in short, flamboyant. The sash was narrower than a standard kimono obi, tied tightly to emphasize the waist and finished with a bow in the back.

There were many meticulous rules regarding these sashes, but for travel, a hooded cloak was added (the hood was always worn), and the hands were clasped inside the sleeves. With short boots on her feet, almost nothing but her face remained visible. While not quite as elaborate as the twelve-layered *junihitoe* of the Heian period, it was heavy equipment on par with a princess of the Kamakura period.

Ayeka eventually emptied her entire closet. Unable to decide, she sighed in front of the mirror.

"What shall I do... I have absolutely nothing to wear!"

Lucky readers who have girlfriends will surely understand: this is the unchanging psychology of women since the dawn of time and across the universe. Whether alien or monster, any sentient being called "woman" must have encountered this specific brand of distress at least once. It is a rite of passage before a date.

Of course, the worrying is the most enjoyable part. And no matter how many clothes one owns, it is a strange fact that before a first date, one discovers that not a single garment is suitable, leading to a frantic dash to the shops with a death grip on one's wallet.

While Ayeka stood before the mirror in her undergarments, Sasami rushed in, her face flushed and out of breath. She was hiding something behind her back.

"Wait, what is this? What's going on?"

"Oh, Sasami..."

Ayeka turned around, turned red, and hurriedly began putting on her clothes.

"What's all this? It's such a mess. Are you going somewhere?"

"No, it's not like that. It's not for right now, but you see..."

Ayeka began cleaning up the scattered clothes, stumbling over her words. Come to think of it, she had nothing to hide from her sister, but with her head full of thoughts of Tenchi, she was desperate to smooth things over.

"Could it be, Big Sister, that you're going on a date with Big Brother Tenchi?"

Sasami, who had been watching her sister's flustered state with great interest, suddenly tugged on her sleeve.

"Eh..."

Caught off guard, Ayeka stared back at Sasami for a moment with a blank expression before her cheeks instantly turned crimson.

"Wh-wh-what are you talking about all of a sudden... That couldn't possibly be it!"

Ayeka grew even redder. In her panic, she gathered up the clothes haphazardly, threw them all into the closet, and slammed the door shut, standing in front of it as if defending a final fortress.

"Hmm..."

Sasami watched her sister's face with an amused side-long glance, then turned her nose up and muttered a monologue just loud enough to be heard. "If Big Sister won't tell me, then Sasami won't tell her either. Oh well, and I even brought something nice that Big Brother Tenchi gave me to look after..."

"Wait, what? What is it, Sasami?" Ayeka's attitude did a complete 180 as she pressed her sister for answers.

"Big Sister goes first," Sasami said curtly.

"Eh, me? I’m not exactly hiding anything..." Ayeka stole a glance at Sasami’s face. *What could she be hiding behind her back? A present from Lord Tenchi? C-could it be... a ring?* Ayeka’s imagination was also quite unhinged, but that was beside the point.

"Listen, Sasami. Uncle called and said he’s taking us to a hot spring. He called just a moment ago. That’s why I was looking at my clothes. Do you understand?"

"Eh, a hot spring? Yay!"

Sasami rejoiced at the unexpected news, nearly clapping her hands together and forgetting about what she was holding.

"Now, it’s your turn. What is that in your hands?"

"Oh, this?" Something cold was placed into Ayeka’s palm. "Isn't it cute? I wanted to catch more, but Big Brother Tenchi said it would be mean, so only this one..."

"What is this?"

The cold green object suddenly regained its vitality and leaped onto the nose of the peering Ayeka.

"KYAAAAAAAH!"

"Big Sister! What’s wrong? Pull yourself together!"

When Ayeka came to, Sasami’s worried face and Tenchi’s troubled one were looking down at her.

"Lord Tenchi..." Ayeka whispered, her eyes brimming with tears. "That was cruel. A present like that..."

"I'm sorry. Sasami-chan said she absolutely had to show it to you, Ayeka-san..."

"My goodness! So it was Sasami!" Ayeka glared at Sasami as she finally managed to sit up.

"I'm sorry, Big Sister. I didn't think you'd be that surprised."

Sasami glanced at Tenchi and began talking rapidly as if making an excuse. "But it’s a frog! A frog! We had them on Jurai too, those big yellow ones. But when I was walking

with Big Brother Tenchi, there were all these little green bean-sized things hopping around. I thought they were just 'Ultra Miracle Super Cute,' and I thought you'd be happy if I showed you... Do you hate frogs, Big Sister?"

"What is this 'Ultra Miracle Super' whatever?" Ayeka was so bewildered by Sasami's chatter that she forgot she was angry and asked for clarification.

"You don't know? It means they're super-super cute."

"....."

Ayeka couldn't help but burst out laughing, and Tenchi followed suit with a relieved smile.

"You really have become an Earthling, haven't you? I can hardly keep up. So, what happened to that 'Ultra Miracle Super Cute' frog?"

"Can I keep it?" Sasami asked back, overjoyed.

"No. I have never kept an animal before. Besides, wild things like that are happiest in the place where they grew up. Isn't that right, Lord Tenchi?"

"Eh? Oh, yes. That's right."

Tenchi had been staring at Ayeka's profile, taking advantage of the fact that the conversation hadn't been directed at him. Thinking he had been caught, he answered flusteredly.

"By the way, Lord Tenchi," Ayeka continued lightheartedly, "I received a phone call from Uncle earlier..."

"Hmph. Look at her acting all sweet."

Ryoko, who was peeking through the corner of the ceiling hanging upside down, muttered to herself.

Tenchi and the others, who never would have imagined Ryoko's head was sprouting from the ceiling, continued their conversation in a peaceful atmosphere.

"If Tenchi wasn't with her, I'd kick that damn woman's teeth in. But then again, it'd be no fun if I couldn't go to the hot springs anymore," Ryoko muttered to herself.

She wondered what she should do to her.

Punching her out would be the quickest way, but that wasn't an option. Ryoko spent a moment in serious deliberation, debating whether she should put thumbtacks in Ayeka's shoes or perhaps wring a dirty floor rag into her miso soup.

Suddenly, a brilliant idea flashed through her mind like a divine revelation.

"Gufufu. I really am a genius, aren't I? Well, now that that's settled, I've got no business staying in a place like this."

With a smirk, Ryoko pulled her head back from the ceiling and spatially teleported into the garden. The late autumn sky was already beginning to grow dark.

"Once we get to the hot springs, she's mine."

As for what was currently crossing Ryoko's mind, she simply stood there with her arms crossed, wearing a creepy smile and nodding to herself as she looked up at Ayeka's room.

The next few days passed without incident, like the calm before a storm.

"Hey, Ryoko! Ayeka-san! Sasami-chan...!"

Tenchi, who had finished his preparations long ago and was waiting outside with his father, Nobuyuki, called out into the house, finally having grown tired of waiting.

"We are coming now!"

A voice answered after a short while. After even more waiting, the front door finally opened.

Ayeka walked out wearing an outer garment with a geometric pattern of crimson, ultramarine, and light blue over a dark red inner lining. Over that, she wore a cherry-blossom-colored traveling robe embroidered with gold and silver thread. On her feet were pure white shoes studded with jewels. She walked toward the car with her sleeves folded in front of her chest and her eyes cast downward. Following behind her

was Sasami, whose light purple traveling outfit was decorated with an assortment of colorful ribbons.

"....."

Tenchi stared at the two of them in a daze, as if they were on a movie set or participating in a costume parade. Ayeka reached the car without any sense of rush and gave a bright smile.

"Please forgive us for making you wait; our preparations took some time."

"Well, this is... truly wonderful..."

Nobuyuki's words seemed to fail him there, and he trailed off.

"I don't know, isn't it a little flashy?" Sasami muttered, looking down at her own ribbon-covered outfit.

That one comment broke the spell over Tenchi.

"Ayeka-san."

"Yes?"

She tilted her head innocently, and Tenchi found himself in a tight spot again.

This person is an alien. No, she's a princess of the Royal Family of Jurai, he thought.

However, if they went to a hot spring in the countryside dressed like that, a massive crowd would undoubtedly form instantly, making it impossible to even walk down the hallways. Then again, once they took the clothes off, it wouldn't really matter anyway.

Tenchi hurriedly shook his head to clear away that stray thought.

"Ayeka-san, those clothes... they're a bit... problematic. We're going to a hot spring, you know? A hot spring. Couldn't you wear something more... normal? Like a one-piece dress or something? Can't you do something about it?"

Ayeka opened her crimson eyes wide and listened to Tenchi in silence.

"Is there... something wrong with my attire?"

"Is there something wrong? I mean..."

What am I supposed to do? Tenchi instinctively looked back toward his father. Nobuyuki was in the middle of sneaking into the driver's seat to escape.

"It's problematic!"

Realizing no one was going to help him, Tenchi ended up shouting.

"Ayeka-san, this is Earth. If you walk around outside looking like that, how on earth am I supposed to explain it? I can't exactly tell people you're an alien from the planet Jurai, can I? Please, just something more normal... Ayeka-san?"

Ayeka’s eyes wavered. In an instant, they welled up with tears.

"I-I am sorry. I... I didn't want to be disrespectful to everyone... I even tried not to make it too exaggerated..."

A single tear rolled down Ayeka’s cheek.

"I shall stay home."

Just as Ayeka turned on her heel to run back into the house, a boisterous, rude laugh erupted from behind Tenchi.

"Bwahahahaha!"

"Well, duh! Where on this planet do you think someone goes to a hot spring dressed like that? Oh wait, right here. Yeah, you just stay behind. I'll go and have a great time in your place. Right, Tenchi?"

"Ryoko?"

Ryoko, who had been goodness-knows-where, was now floating in mid-air in a cross-legged position. She wore clothes that looked like striped pajamas and looked down at the group with her arms crossed.

"Wh-why are you floating?! Why can't you ever just come out normally?"

Ryoko looked down at Tenchi with total indifference.

"Who cares? The small stuff doesn't matter. Come on, let's go, Tenchi. I'm tired of waiting. Man, I'm bored, I'm bored."

That voice made Ayeka stop in her tracks. She spun around and shouted back with angry eyes.

"What was that?! You didn't come out either! Besides, are you really in a position to comment on someone else's appearance? In those... paja... paja..."

"These aren't pajamas. They're everyday clothes. Everyday clothes! I could hardly go to a hot spring in my combat gear, could I? I don't really care about looks, anyway."

Ryoko wiggled an accessory that looked like a belt or a tail.

"Come on, let's go, Tenchi. If you keep messing around with that woman, the sun's gonna go down. It's fine, she said she'd stay behind herself."

"When did I ever say such a thing?!" Ayeka snapped back, her temper flaring.

"You just said it! You said you were staying home!" Ryoko shouted back, equally annoyed.

"That was then, and I have changed my mind now!"

Ayeka marched over and pointed a finger directly at Ryoko.

"If you are going, then I am going as well! How could I possibly leave Master Tenchi to a woman like you? Now, get down here! It is rude to hover while someone is speaking to you!"

"No way. Not for someone whose mind changes every five seconds. Besides, you're just in the way. I was planning on doing some... 'nice things' alone with Tenchi at the hot spring."

"You where what?!"

What is wrong with these two? Tenchi let out a sigh. *It's not my fault, right?* he muttered weakly in his heart.

If it was starting like this at the departure, he could pretty much guess how the rest would go. It had been a mistake to try and take an alien and a monster woman to a hot spring in the first place. *That damn old man...*

Tenchi glared resentfully at Nobuyuki, who had retreated into the car following the principle of "a wise man stays away from danger." The argument between the two was reaching its peak.

Just as Tenchi shook his head and was about to give up and go back inside, Sasami stepped in.

"Hey, you two! Don't you feel sorry for Tenchi-niichan? If you keep fighting, I'm leaving you both behind! Honestly, you're both old enough to know better!"

Sasami stood between the two with her hands on her hips, looking genuinely cross. Tenchi almost felt like clapping.

"Sasami-chan, you're amazing! Exactly right!"

Nobuyuki climbed out of the car with a grin and spoke to the two women, who were now looking bewildered.

"For now, why don't you go change? I'll even give you a hand. There’s no rush, we still have plenty of time. While we're at it, how about some nice matching miniskirts?"

Th-this old man...

Ayeka and Ryoko stared at each other in stunned silence, then looked at Nobuyuki’s happy face, which seemed to claim he had no ulterior motives whatsoever.

"You perverted old man... mind your own business!"

Ryoko swung her fist at Nobuyuki. Ayeka, momentarily allied with her rival, pulled on Ryoko’s sleeve as they both vanished back into the house, followed closely by Sasami.

It was another thirty minutes later when the three emerged from the house again, dressed in reasonably appropriate clothing.

Chapter 10:

The Masaki Family...

While the Masaki family was playing out their domestic drama, a lone ship sat in the dark reaches of space, far from Earth.

It was difficult to say if "ship" was even the right word for it. It was like a sinister dragon that reflected the darkness of the universe and blotted out the light of the stars. It was a massive metallic combat vessel: the *Soja*.

The interior of the warship was divided into several blocks, each one a vast and complex maze. There were countless small rooms, corridors lit only by emergency lights, and warp points that only the creator of the ship would understand. it was like a labyrinthine city or a dungeon filled with various traps.

And within that silent space, there was no sign of life

In the main room at the heart of the *Soja*—a space where only the master could enter—a solemn harmony echoed. A theme rose slowly as if from the depths of the earth, entwined with a counter-melody to form a complex six-part fugue. The music, which bore a slight resemblance to Bach, was being spun from the hands of a tall man.

Sitting before a pipe organ that seemed to reach the heavens, the man wore a deep green cloak and had his long silver hair tied back in a single ponytail. As the man’s hands expertly navigated a fast passage, a ghost-like shadow of a woman appeared behind him in the cathedral-like room.

The man continued to play without turning around. The shadow of the petite woman wavered like a heat haze, standing there expressionlessly. Suddenly, the man stopped playing.

"Professor. How did you find today’s performance?"

The man turned around, revealing his handsome features. He had golden eyes and thin, set lips. His black robes, reminiscent of a medieval monk, rustled softly.

"It has been nearly seven hundred years since I sealed you away. I am truly grateful that you have remained such an excellent audience."

The man slid off his seat and stood before the shadow of the woman he called Professor.

"Looking at you like this, you have hardly changed at all. Yes, just like when you were the professor and I was the student."

The man reached out toward the woman as if with affection. The woman's image distorted slightly, and the man's fingers glowed a pale white where they touched her cheek.

"I prefer you as you are now. You, who have become nothing more than the shadow of the greatest genius scientist in the universe. Professor Washu!"

The man laughed dryly and brought his face close to the fading shadow.

"You were far too much of a genius. Did you trust me so much that you couldn't read your student's heart? Or..."

The man peered into the woman's green eyes and extended both hands as if trying to hold onto the vanishing illusion.

"Did you love me enough to walk into the trap yourself? I suppose there is no way of knowing now."

The figure of the woman called Washu wavered and began to disappear. The man wore a thin smile and swept the hem of his cloak aside.

"I've developed a habit of talking to myself. If you were here, I was going to tell you something that would surely please you, but speaking to a fading aura is a hollow endeavor. Professor! I have found what I sought for so long. The key to the truth that you never taught me."

The woman's form was almost invisible now, but the man continued to speak regardless.

"I am the only one who can name that energy. I shall be the one to unravel it. The truth that every scientist has dreamed of—the law that governs all of the universe—I shall have it! I, your student, Kagato, shall grasp it!"

The woman's form had now completely vanished.

The man... or rather, the genius scientist Kagato, who was now feared throughout the galaxy as a permanently wanted criminal, wore a cold smile as he called out to his ship.

"Soja. Give me the data on Earth, the third planet of the solar system."

"Yes, Professor," a low female voice replied—neither sweet nor cold—and a screen appeared.

"Here... there was a reaction from here," Kagato muttered as he cycled through various windows. "To think it was buried on such a backwater planet... no wonder I didn't notice it."

A map of the area around Okayama appeared on the screen, and a point of light manifested. It was exactly where the Masaki household was located.

"Seven hundred years since Ryoko attacked the Royal Family of Jurai... I thought that failure had already vanished into the space dust."

Kagato's eyes glowed with an eerie light.

"There is something that woke up along with you, isn't there, Ryoko? Surely you don't intend to keep it all to yourself. That is a prize a bit too large for your hands."

Kagato closed his eyes for a moment. An uncontrollable smile played on his lips. He quietly opened his eyes and spoke to the point of light on the screen.

"Keep it safe until I come to collect it. The greatest treasure in the universe... the Tenchi-Ken!"

With a wave of his hand, Kagato cleared the screen and called to the *Soja* once more.

"Head for the third planet of the solar system. Wait in stealth mode. I shall proceed to the investigation point."

There was an acknowledgment. After the announcement of the warp start, the entire massive warship was enveloped in a pale blue light indicating the energy critical point. A moment later, the *Soja* vanished, leaving only a ring of light behind.

Now, back to the Masaki party.

They had just arrived at the porte-cochere of a rustic hot spring inn. The women were squealing with excitement as they stepped onto the pebbles and headed for the main entrance.

Kamidake Onsen was a small inn known only to the locals, but it was kept clean as a proper ryokan should be. The entrance was swept tidy, the granite pavement was

sprinkled with water, and the landlady—Tenchi’s great-aunt—stood there smiling, dressed sharply in a striped kimono.

"Nobuyuki-san, it’s quite a lively group you've brought this year."

The old woman added this while curiously observing Ayeka in her kimono, Ryoko in her striped dress, and Sasami in her kimono-style one-piece and coat.

"Are these all Tenchi’s girlfriends?"

"Eh? No, well, hahaha..."

Nobuyuki laughed it off and gave a slight bow, saying they would be in her care again this year.

"Hey, I'm going to show the ladies to their room, so I'll leave the luggage to you!"

Tenchi, who was already standing by with as much luggage as he could carry, nodded resignedly. He handed some bags to Nobuyuki and prepared to head back to the car for the rest.

"Oh, I'll help you out."

Ryoko eagerly grabbed Tenchi’s arm and practically dragged him toward the parking lot. It was a move made with full awareness of Ayeka’s gaze.

"Why, I never...!"

Ayeka was annoyed to see Ryoko forcibly taking Tenchi’s arm, but she couldn't very well start a fight at the entrance of an inn where they were planning to stay for several days. Resigned, Ayeka began to walk behind the landlady and Nobuyuki.

Tenchi glanced back at the entrance. Seeing the aura of anger radiating from Ayeka’s back, he couldn't help but sigh. There was no way three days would pass safely. He would bet his life on it; he probably wouldn't be able to come back here starting next year.

What is Dad thinking? Actually, knowing his personality, he's definitely not thinking about anything at all. Anyway, if we can just get through this without making the newspapers, I'll thank every god there is. Please, let nothing happen.

"You're looking pretty down."

Tenchi’s prayer was shattered by that one sentence.

"Finally, we're all alone," Ryoko said, sidling up to Tenchi with a grin that seemed to split her face from ear to ear.

"R-Ryoko!"

Tenchi instinctively pulled himself away.

"Look, please just behave yourself. Like I've said many times, the old lady here is my relative. Don't go fighting with Ayeka-san. And please, don't go appearing and disappearing. No walking through walls, either. Got it?!"

Having her advances snubbed so suddenly, Ryoko glared back at Tenchi with a sour expression.

"What's with that tone?"

Looking at Ryoko’s completely foul mood, Tenchi realized he shouldn't have said anything, but it was too late.

"You're making it sound like everything is my fault. Why is Ayeka okay but I'm not? That girl acts all meek and polite, but on the inside, she's just a stuck-up snob. She looks down her nose at anyone she thinks is below her. What's so bad about being a space pirate anyway?! I was locked up for seven hundred years because of her brother, and she’s still trying to bully me."

Ryoko floated up into the air and sat cross-legged right in front of Tenchi’s nose.

"And you're no better. I know exactly what happened in that mountain hut. The moment you were alone with that woman, you turned bright red and started playing out some 'pure love' drama. Why isn't it like that when you're with me?"

"G-get down! What if someone sees you?"

Tenchi was horrified by the sight of Ryoko floating in mid-air and tried to grab her knees to pull her down.

"Besides, what are you talking about with the mountain hut? How do you know about that? I didn't do anything; we were just talking, and it's none of your business. There's no way Ayeka-san would talk about it, so how do you know?"

Seeing Tenchi’s flustered state, Ryoko’s mood seemed to improve slightly. She drifted down and hung onto Tenchi’s neck.

"Heh-heh, just as I thought. You really can't tell a lie to save your life. Don't be so panicked. If you like pure love, you should just say so. I can do that too, you know. Where should we start? Holding hands? Don't make that face, Tenchi. I'll take responsibility and lead you all the way to the end."

"You're... so damn heavy! Get off me!"

Tenchi finally lost his patience. He shook Ryoko off and began unloading the luggage from the trunk with unnecessary force.

"Don't get so mad."

Ryoko followed behind Tenchi as he carried the bags, floating low to the ground. She was secretly glad he hadn't realized she had peeked into Ryo-Ohki’s memories regarding the mountain hut.

"I like you. After all, I’ve been watching you since you were this small. Do you think I can just stand by and let some girl who showed up yesterday take you away? Forget that stuck-up Ayeka. You'll just spend your whole life under her thumb. She's actually a sadist, you know. I wish I could have shown you her face when she was tormenting me inside the *Ryu-Oh*. Back then, I thought to myself: this girl was a strangely prickly kid, but she grew up into an even worse woman."

Tenchi ignored Ryoko as she chattered away behind him, making frustrated trips back and forth between the car and the entrance. Suddenly, he stopped and turned around.

"Ryoko. If you're not going to help, then go somewhere else. Ayeka-san isn't that kind of person. And you’re one to talk about other people! You have legs, so walk like a normal guest! If you can't do that, then go somewhere where I can't see you!"

For a moment, Ryoko looked like a pet dog that had been bitten. Then, the fact that Tenchi was genuinely angry began to sink into her heart.

"Tenchi..."

Tenchi picked up the last of the mountain of luggage and started walking toward the entrance without looking back, his lips pressed tight. A flash of anger lit up Ryoko’s eyes.

"You idiot! Fine, have it your way!!"

At that moment, all the luggage Tenchi had just carried in came raining down on top of him.

"...I'm exhausted, Dad..."

Tenchi grumbled as he soaked in the men’s bath with Nobuyuki, his face already looking weary. Nobuyuki, who had a towel on his head and was nodding as he stretched out his limbs, said only one thing.

"Well, that was unfortunate."

The moment Tenchi lost his focus, his body slipped, and he sank into the water up to his head before Nobuyuki pulled him back up.

"You okay?"

Tenchi waved his hand and coughed, leaning back against the rock ledge even more limply than before.

"You won't survive the rest of the trip if you're like that. Here, let me see that towel."

Nobuyuki took the towel from Tenchi’s hand, wrung it out tightly, and handed it back.

"You tie it like this, see?"

Nobuyuki tied his own towel around his head so that the knot was right under his nose. He looked at Tenchi and grinned. It was the classic "thief style" look. When Tenchi pointed that out, Nobuyuki shook his head.

"Don't say a word. Just follow me. A man should be a man of few words and swift action. That is the secret of a master."

Nobuyuki swam over to the bamboo fence separating the men’s and women’s baths, grabbed onto the rock ledge, and began to climb.

"Dad!"

The horrified Tenchi shouted instinctively.

"Shh! Too loud!" Nobuyuki turned back and beckoned frantically. "I told you not to say anything."

"But...!"

"I'm not doing anything bad. Since they're right next door, I'm just going to have a little look."

"That's peeping!"

Nobuyuki wagged a finger at Tenchi. "It is the autumn of the arts. It would be disrespectful *not* to appreciate the view."

"That's just... being a pervert, right?"

Tenchi's previous gloom had vanished, replaced by the desperate need to stop his unreasonable father.

"A pervert? That's such an old-fashioned word. No, no, it's nothing that dramatic. It's more like... wanting to catch a glimpse of the Mona Lisa through a crowd of people. That's all."

Nobuyuki's metaphors were also quite dated, but his intent was clear.

"That's not it. I'm saying it's just wrong to go peeping like that."

"Then should I ask for permission first?"

The sheer futility of the argument made Tenchi's head spin.

"Pull yourself together, Tenchi. You're only fifteen, right? Why are you acting so withered already? If you really don't want to see, I won't force you. But I'm going. No matter what anyone says, I'm going."

Nobuyuki began to climb the rocks again.

"W-wait, Dad! Don't do something so pathetic!"

Tenchi instinctively started climbing after him. Nobuyuki smirked but quickly hid it, making a small amount of space for his son as he climbed up with the meticulous caution of a mountain climber.

It was then.

"What are you two doing?"

A voice drifted down from the sky.

That thought turned out to be a mistake, as Ryoko suddenly popped her head out from behind the bamboo fence.

"Whaaa, Ryoko..."

The end of the sentence was drowned out by a loud splashing sound, and Ryoko had to lean out to confirm where Nobuyuki had crashed.

"What, Tenchi too? Clinging to a spot like that—you must be peeping."

"Dad..."

Tenchi remained clung to the rocky ledge, looking down flustered at Nobuyuki, who was passed out in the hot spring.

"I wondered why you were taking so long, and it turns out you were sneaking around in a place like this."

Ryoko floated up lightly and landed beside Tenchi in her natural, birthday-suit state.

"Why don't you just come over here?"

"Ry... Ryoko!"

Tenchi hurriedly dived into the water, sinking down and tensing his body.

"Idiot! Get back to the women's bath quickly. This is the men's bath."

"I know that."

Ryoko placed her hands on her hips and slowly descended in front of Tenchi, as if flaunting her magnificent proportions.

"The women's bath up there is wide and feels great. I said, come on already."

Just as he had an ominous premonition, Tenchi found himself held in a tight embrace by Ryoko.

"What are you doing? Let go!"

"Let go? Is it okay if I let go?"

"Eh?"

Ryoko manifested one meter above the women's bath and released him; the poor Tenchi ended up falling headfirst into the water.

"Ahahaha!"

Ryoko’s laughter echoed in his head. Tenchi regained his posture and snapped at her.

"Ryoko! What do you think you're doing!"

Suddenly, something soft was pressed against Tenchi’s back, and at the same time, arms were wrapped around him.

"What are you so shy about? You saw me naked inside the shrine, didn't you?"

"Back then, you were like a dried sardine..."

T-this sensation... This soft, indescribable, elastic feeling—it was like a double dose of happiness. Tenchi’s every nerve became concentrated on the sensation against his back, and he became unable to think straight.

"Um, Ryoko... Just, you know..."

"What is it, Tenchi?"

Ryoko’s hot breath tickled his earlobe.

"St-stop it..."

"What’s that? I can’t hear you."

Ryoko rubbed her body against him even closer. Without the courage to turn around, Tenchi listened to his own heartbeat growing faster and faster.

"Tenchi-niichan!"

At that voice, Tenchi suddenly snapped back to his senses. Sasami, wearing a bath robe and carrying Ryo-Ohki on her head, came running toward them with a smile. Ryoko quickly pulled away and waved at Sasami.

"Sasami-chan, over here, over here."

It was just as Tenchi let out a sigh of relief, thinking he was saved. Sasami told him he was late, and then, without any hesitation, she continued.

"Wait right there. I'm going to go call Big Sister now."

Big sister? Did she mean Lady Ayeka? There was no time to tell her to wait. Sasami went pattering off toward the changing room, and when Tenchi hurriedly tried to get out of the water, Ryoko's hand firmly pinned him down.

"There's no need to run away, Tenchi."

A strangely gentle voice whispered in his ear.

"Try moving even a single step from here, and I'll strip that thing wrapped around your waist right off you."

Tenchi froze. *Damn it, I thought she was up to something... she intends to humiliate me.* Tenchi was frantic at the thought of being seen by Ayeka squabbling with a naked Ryoko like this; or rather, even before that, he realized it was absolutely scandalous for him to be in the women's bath in the first place.

"This isn't a joke!"

Tenchi kept his voice low and turned around.

"I told you I didn't want any trouble! I'm going back over there. Let go of me!"

Just then, a bright voice reached Tenchi's ears.

"Big Sister, hurry up!"

"Wait, Sasami. Do not raise your voice so loud. Honestly, ever since you started associating with that woman, your manners have worsened slightly."

"Oh, Big Sister, you know you're happy too... This is your first time at a hot spring, right? Look, Tenchi-niichan is waiting too. And Ryoko-oneechan."

They're here, Tenchi thought. It was all over.

Ayeka emerged from behind the bamboo fence, and her eyes met Tenchi's. In the next instant, Ayeka spun on her heel and fled back into the changing room she had just come from before Tenchi could say a word. Soon, the sound of an argument could be heard.

"Sasami! Why didn't you tell me! That Lord Tenchi was here..."

"I just told you. It's fine, isn't it? We're family."

"That is not the point! It might be fine for you because you are a child, but I shall excuse myself until later."

Tenchi timidly glanced toward the changing room and resolved to return to the men's bath even if he had to knock Ryoko down. Suddenly, Ryoko's presence vanished. Along with it, the towel wrapped around his waist disappeared as if by magic.

"...Damn it... that woman..."

Tenchi groaned, ground his teeth, and writhed, but there was nothing he could do. Ryoko herself was in the middle of disappearing, having stuck her head through the wall of the changing room.

"When I say no, I mean no!"

Still in her bath robe, Ayeka clung to the wall of the changing room, glaring at Sasami with a resolve that wouldn't budge an inch.

"But Big Sister, Sasami already told Tenchi-niichan to wait."

Sasami argued back, refusing to lose.

"I know nothing of that! You should just go in by yourself."

"Don't be so cold."

Another arm twined around Ayeka's arm.

"Wh-what..."

Before she could finish, Ryoko's upper body appeared through the wall, followed by one leg poking out.

"Ryoko! You, in that appearance..."

"What? Is something wrong with me?"

Ryoko stopped midway through the wall and looked down at her own chest.

"N... Naked..."

"Huh!?"

Ryoko reflexively asked back.

"What's wrong with being naked?"

"Ryoko-oneechan, your breasts are really big."

Sasami murmured solemnly, her large eyes wide with wonder.

"Sasami!"

Ayeka reflexively shouted.

"Stop that, it's embarrassing..."

Ayeka turned her face away, blushing deeply.

"Surely you didn't... in that state... to Lord Tenchi..."

"Oh yeah, Tenchi said to hurry up."

Ryoko smiled brightly and quickly whispered into Ayeka's ear.

"I heard you were quite bold back at the mountain hut."

"Eh...!?"

A series of private memories flashed through Ayeka's mind at high speed. *Could it be, could this woman have... to Lord Tenchi...*

"How do you know about that!?"

The words escaped her mouth of their own accord.

"Who knows? If you don't come soon, I'll ask him about even more embarrassing things."

Ryoko pulled her leg and head back through the wall.

"W-wait! That's a lie, right? Lord Tenchi would never speak of such things."

On the contrary, Ayeka grabbed Ryoko's arm, trying to hold her back. On the other side of the wall, Ryoko smirked and pulled her arm back, bringing the desperately clinging Ayeka along with her.

"It's a lie."

Ryoko stuck her tongue out at the stunned Ayeka and suddenly teleported.

"Tenchi, sorry to keep you wait—"

At that moment, a trumpet suddenly blared, and a spotlight hit the two of them. Of course, the "two" were Tenchi, who was sitting formally in the water, and Ayeka, who was standing at the entrance with her hands clasped together. Ayeka's cheeks instantly turned the color of cherry blossoms, her white bath robe shone with an angelic purity, and flowers bloomed in the background.

"Lord Tenchi..."

"Lady Ayeka...!"

Stars sparkled in their eyes, shimmering as they reflected each other's figures. They had already entered another dimension. Ryoko realized that the plan she had carefully crafted for this moment had backfired.

Damn it, these two... Suddenly doing a drama scene without any context. Almost instinctively, Ryoko reached out and pulled something from the back of Ayeka, who was quietly descending while surrounded by flowers and hearts. Ayeka's bath robe fluttered down.

A moment—no, two moments later—a terrifying scream and the sound of water echoed throughout. Ayeka crouched down trembling, trying to hide her chest with both arms, while Tenchi, pathetically enough, had completely passed out and was floating in the water like a piece of wakame or kombu seaweed.

"Big Brother!!"

Sasami, who had been watching with bated breath behind Ryoko to see what would happen, jumped out.

"Tenchi-niichan, pull yourself together!"

Sasami desperately pulled Tenchi up, grabbing his shoulders and shaking him.

"Gyahahahaha... ha... hee-hee-hee..."

Ryoko finally couldn't hold it in anymore and was doubled over, rolling with laughter.

"S-Sasami-chan?"

At Ryoko's idiotic laughter, Tenchi came to his senses and feebly muttered.

"Could you get my towel back from that monster woman?"

"Eh, the towel?"

"You mean this?"

Ryoko appeared, fluttering the towel with teary eyes from laughing.

"Give it back!"

As Tenchi snatched the towel away, a voice came from behind.

"Give me back my bath robe as well!"

Ayeka was glaring at Ryoko, her eyes welling with tears of anger and humiliation.

"Yes, yes. My, what a disaster that was."

A deep satisfaction bordering on ecstasy welled up in Ryoko's heart. *Serves you right. If you thought I'd always stay quiet, you were dead wrong, Princess of the Juraian Royal Family.* Ryoko looked around at the two pitiful figures grooming themselves, smirking triumphantly.

"It's fine, isn't it? Being naked once or twice won't make you shrink."

Ayeka bit her lip and tied the cord of her bath robe into a tight knot. Suddenly, she stood up with a splash and blocked Ryoko's path.

"How dare you... how dare you do that to me! You shameless, exhibitionist monster woman!"

Ryoko shot her a glance and replied with a cool face.

"You were planning on showing him eventually anyway, weren't you? It’s a good thing; saved you the trouble. Or were you waiting until you grew a bit more before showing him?"

"What..."

Beyond anger, Ayeka turned pale and began to tremble violently.

"What a vulgar... indecent..."

Ryoko looked back as if fed up.

"What’s indecent? If you like Tenchi, then just like him and stop acting all refined—let's fight for real. Sneaking around in the shadows like that, that's what I can't stand about you!"

Suddenly, there was a sharp *slap* sound.

"Who did you say was sneaking around!?"

With her hand still out from slapping Ryoko’s cheek, Ayeka snapped at her.

"You’re the one who must have been peeping or something...!"

Before she could finish, Ryoko’s palm struck Ayeka’s cheek back and forth.

"Don't insult me! Ryo-Ohki was there! I'm Ryo-Ohki’s master. I know whatever Ryo-Ohki sees. Got that!"

"My...!"

Ayeka was speechless, and Tenchi, who was watching from behind a distant rock with only his head sticking out, was also speechless. *I see, so that was it.*

"Tenchi is mine! I'm telling you clearly, if you try to sneak in from the side, I won't let you get away with it!"

"When, where, at what hour, what minute, and what second was it decided that he belongs to you!?"

This was bad. Tenchi immediately thought of where this fight would lead. *I have to get them to stop, or I'll never be able to show my face here again.*

"Wait, Ryoko. Lady Ayeka..."

The two of them turned around simultaneously with terrifying expressions. Even from a distance, he could see one clear handprint on Ryoko's cheek and two on Ayeka's.

"Um..."

Tenchi started to speak, but felt the words he should say slipping through his fingers. *Am I the cause of this? Ever since I woke Ryoko up, maybe if I had just said one thing clearly it would have been settled, but instead I left it alone and let the two of them fight.*

If I had clearly said I dislike them if I dislike them, or I like them if I like them, or that they're a nuisance if they're a nuisance, maybe it wouldn't have become such a mess...

Blaming himself with the earnestness of a fifteen-year-old boy, the poor Tenchi forgot the fact that he might actually be the victim. And for the two women glaring at each other, the chance to reflect on their own ill-fated personalities never arrived.

"I understand."

Ayeka and Ryoko glared at each other once more.

"It seems I must settle things with you once and for all."

Ayeka muttered in an eerily quiet voice and clasped her hands in front of her chest.

"Finally felt like doing it?"

Ryoko smirked and unfolded her crossed arms. The gem on her left wrist began to glow. Then, a small cylindrical barrier surrounded Ryoko. It was the same barrier that had previously surrounded Ryo-Ohki to freeze its movement. Ryoko gave a derisive snort.

"Well, I guess this is about the best a princess could come up with."

"Keep laughing while you can!"

Suddenly, countless tentacles sprouted from the small cylinder. At the moment she thought she had captured her, Ryoko's figure abruptly vanished.

"Idiot. You think I'd fall for the same trick twice?"

By the time Ayeka turned around, Ryoko had landed on the rocky ledge overlooking the bathhouse and was sticking her tongue out.

"Now it's my turn."

Ryoko opened both hands and began to chant something. The gem on her left wrist flickered like a flame, and the surface of the hot spring water began to ripple. From the ground and from within the water, countless pale, Will-o'-the-wisp-like objects appeared, flying and drifting around Ryoko.

"What is this?"

Tenchi, who had ended up retreating behind the rocks, questioned Sasami as she gazed wonderingly at the spirit flames.

"I don't know. But they're pretty, aren't they? Is it magic?"

"Pretty? They look like hitodama to me."

"What's a hitodama?"

"The spirits of dead humans. A kind of ghost."

"Ohh." Sasami did not appear to be particularly frightened.

The spirit flames surrounded Ayeka, colliding against the wall of her barrier and scattering in bursts of light.

"What is the meaning of this? Is it some new form of entertainment?" Protected by her barrier, Ayeka maintained a composed expression.

"These are monsters, the restless spirits of the earth. Did you finally figure out why I'm called Ryoko?" Ryoko had summoned the malevolent spirits—more accurately, she had called forth the local spiritual energy that existed on every planet.

The spirit flames now gathered at Ryoko's feet, flickering as they fused together and gradually grew larger. Eventually, long arms emerged, and four red flames were ignited in what served as the head. The earthen monster bared countless fangs and roared.

Ryoko nodded with satisfaction. "Now, go and let that cheeky woman play with you!"

Looking at the giant earth spirit that stared blankly at her while swaying with a pale blue light, even the formidable Ayeka flinched slightly.

"Go on! I said go!" Ryoko commanded. However, the spirit did not move. "Hurry up, you slowpoke!"

Becoming flustered, Ryoko kicked the back of the spirit's head. At that moment, the creature spun around.

"Whoa? What, what is it?" The spirit let out a growl and swung its arm sideways, sweeping across the rocky ledge where Ryoko stood. The ledge crumbled, and debris scattered in all directions.

"Eek...!" Ryoko teleported away just in time. Landing atop a bamboo fence, she furrowed her brows and looked between her wrists. "Dammit... I haven't used it in seven hundred years, so I completely forgot. I need the gem on my right hand to control that thing!"

There was no time to leisurely consider a countermeasure. The spirit, having spotted Ryoko, came stomping toward her and delivered a blow with all its might. The bamboo fence shattered like a toy, and Tenchi instinctively pulled Sasami close to him.

"O-ho-ho-ho-ho!" A grating laugh echoed. "What a truly amusing spectacle. Look, your master is right over there."

The spirit turned at the sound of the voice. Ayeka gasped and recoiled in alarm. "Look, I said over there! Shoo! Shoo!"

Perhaps offended by her tone, the spirit raised its arms and came toward Ayeka this time.

"I said no! I have nothing to do with this. Now, go over there, quickly!"

The spirit continued its steady approach. Finally, Ayeka let out a scream and dashed into the dressing room.

"Ayeka-san!" Tenchi instinctively started to stand up, but realized he was wearing nothing but a loincloth and possessed no weapons.

"Tenchi! What are you standing around dazed for? Go get the Tenchi-ken, hurry!" Ryoko suddenly appeared and grabbed the hand of Sasami, who had been hiding behind the rocks, pulling her up. At some point, Ryoko had gone to get dressed; she was fully clothed and had brought a change of clothes for Sasami as well.

"Ryoko-oneechan!" Sasami jumped toward Ryoko happily.

"It’s about to become a game of tag, so change quickly and go to your room."

"Okay!" With Ryo-Ohki perched on her head, Sasami skipped away joyfully and disappeared into the back of the dressing room.

Tenchi remained standing in the bath area, watching the exchange in a daze.

"You really are slow, aren't you!" Ryoko suddenly grabbed him by both sides, and Tenchi materialized in mid-air along with her.

"Where is it? Where's the Tenchi-ken!"

"Ah, over there..." Tenchi pointed toward the men's dressing room.

"Go get it, fast!"

Are you telling me to fight? You're the one who summoned that monster, Tenchi thought. But by the time he prepared to speak, Ryoko had vanished, and he found himself standing alone in the empty dressing room.

Chapter 11:

Meanwhile, in a Familiar Place...

This was the familiar scene of the First Investigation Division at the Solar System Branch of the Galaxy Police 7th District Headquarters. The atmosphere inside the station was a stark contrast to before; it was in a state of total uproar.

The cause of the commotion was a single TV—or rather, a broadcast from the Galactic Network. Nearly every detective and staff member from the division was crowded in front of the wide screen, shouting various things at once.

"Right there! Go, go, go!" "Ah! My Freddy-chan!" "You did it! Angel Dust!"

It was nothing more than a simple dodgeball match, though more accurately, it was called the Galaxy Super Dodgeball Battle. It was a sport where a barrier was erected in space, and players from various star systems wearing custom battle suits tried to crush one another within a 3D court. Of course, the ball was no ordinary ball. It was a spherical device equipped with a timer—to put it bluntly, a bomb—making it a quite dangerous game. Naturally, fatalities occurred.

On the screen, teams named Angel Dust and Devil Wing were engaged in combat, with Angel Dust holding a slight advantage. And, of course, the ones shouting themselves hoarse with flushed faces were the detectives who had bet large sums of money on Devil Wing.

"Ahhh, my living expenses for next month!" "Goddess of the Galaxy Police, please, please bring luck to my ticket!"

No one showed any intention of returning to their regular duties.

Chief Anderson, sitting dejectedly alone in his office sipping tea, muttered to himself, "It’s like this every year at this time. Good grief. Unless a major incident occurs, this place is effectively closed for business."

The Chief pulled a magazine from a mounting pile of documents. It was a somberly designed haiku magazine with the "Galaxy" logo on it. He sighed and began flipping through the pages.

"Early summer rain... And the players disappear... Like bubbles of foam."

Chief Anderson snapped the magazine shut and let out another heavy sigh. "No, no. It's because I write such trivial things that I keep getting rejected."

The Chief wondered idly what "early summer rain" actually was, but suddenly took up his pen and wrote fluidly in the Chief's logbook with masterful calligraphy:

Live broadcast... Detectives and staff alike... Are but mere mortals.

Chief Anderson abruptly dropped his pen and buried his head in his hands. "No, no. Why is there such a lack of refinement? Perhaps I simply have no talent after all."

The sight of the lion-headed Leonisian groaning with his head in his hands was quite pathetic, but just then, another staff member who was tone-deaf to sports arrived.

"Chief, do you have a moment?"

"Ah, Nobeyama-kun. Come in."

Captain Nobeyama of the First Investigation Division entered carrying a shogi board and sat down on the reception sofa. "How about a game?"

Chief Anderson nodded slightly at Nobeyama's suggestion.

"Since they're all like that out there anyway, no work is getting done. I figured I'd escape in here," Nobeyama said.

Chief Anderson closed his logbook, stood up with a heavy grunt, and looked out at the commotion beyond the glass door. "Well, it's not like there are any major incidents here anyway."

"Mihoshi isn't here today, either," Nobeyama muttered with a look of relief as he arranged the pieces. "And for that matter, Kiyone is away on leave. Apparently, there's a memorial service, so she returned to Jurai."

Nobeyama helped himself to the teapot and poured some tea, looking up at the Chief with a smile. "Honestly, just having those two out of the station makes my shoulders feel so much lighter. I wish every day could be like this."

"Umu." Chief Anderson sat down heavily on the sofa, psyching himself up for the game.

It was at that moment.

An emergency communication lamp lit up accompanied by an intermittent tone, and the face of a stern man appeared on the screen. Chief Anderson leaped to his feet.

"Th-this is... Commander-in-Chief!"

Nobeyama was also startled into standing up; realizing the situation, he quickly shoved the shogi board under the table.

"The eternal criminal, Kagato, has appeared. Based on the wake calculated from the point where the signature of Kagato's ship, the Soja, was detected, it is believed he is heading toward the Solar System. I want an investigation launched immediately."

"Yes, sir! Understood!" Chief Anderson saluted, standing at rigid attention.

"By the way, Anderson-kun, is our Mihoshi doing well?" Commander Kuramitsu, the highest authority at Galaxy Police Headquarters, asked as his expression suddenly softened.

"Yes, your granddaughter is doing quite well. She isn't in the station at the moment, but I can contact her later..."

Commander Kuramitsu waved him off. "No, no, that's quite alright. I'm sure she's causing you various troubles, but I appreciate you looking after her."

"No, 'trouble' is hardly the word..." Before Chief Anderson could finish his sentence, the communication cut off.

The Chief wiped the sweat from his forehead and muttered, "...This is a major incident."

"Yes," Nobeyama replied with a tense face and a hollow tone.

"Who is currently on the Solar System patrol?"

"Well, uh, about that..." A chilling silence filled the room.

"...It wouldn't happen to be Mihoshi, would it?"

"Yes... that is exactly who it is."

Chief Anderson staggered. "Recall her immediately! If anything happens to that girl, my head on a platter won't be enough to settle it. Send Andy and Sonia!"

Nobeyama started to rush out of the Chief's office but stopped with his hand on the doorknob and hurried back. "It's alright, Chief. I just thought of an excellent plan!"

Seeing Nobeyama's smile, Chief Anderson could not respond immediately and stared back with a frown.

"It's fine if it's Mihoshi. Suppose she catches a signature of Kagato while on patrol; she just needs to confirm the coordinates, request backup, and return to base. We just have to tell her that. If things go well, Mihoshi will receive a commendation from Headquarters for her prompt action and get a celebratory transfer. How about it? If it works, we'll be liberated from this mountain of incident reports, this hell of invoices, and these stress-induced stomach ulcers. It's a win-win, right?"

Chief Anderson wavered. It did indeed look like a good plan. But would it really go that smoothly? As if reading his mind, Nobeyama continued.

"You know Mihoshi's luck better than anyone, Chief, don't you?"

It was true. Mihoshi's luck was nothing short of miraculous. It was a common theory that she had inherited Commander Kuramitsu's extraordinary fortune directly. Some even whispered that she absorbed the luck of those around her. Moreover, Mihoshi was an excellent detective. There were even rumors that instead of her chasing criminals, the criminals ended up being drawn to her.

However, there was one drawback: whenever there were satellites, shuttles, land, or buildings in Mihoshi's path, they all inevitably turned into mountains of incident reports and invoices.

Chief Anderson made his decision. "Fine! Captain Nobeyama, let's gamble on your method!"

Nobeyama rushed out, and at the same time, an emergency call echoed throughout the branch station.

This was near Saturn within the Solar System. The person in question was leisurely conducting a routine patrol in a private shuttle. This was the rumored First-Class Detective, Mihoshi Kuramitsu, granddaughter of Commander Kuramitsu.

To be precise, one could hardly call it "patrolling." The seat in the cockpit where Mihoshi should have been sitting was empty, and the controls were set to full auto. Ordinarily, her partner, First-Class Detective Kiyone Makibi, would be sitting behind her, but unfortunately, she was on vacation. The ship’s personality-integrated computer, Yukinojo, was currently handling the duties.

Suddenly, a call sign appeared on the monitor.

Mihoshi was in a private room located quite far back from the cockpit. Although called a "private room," to the uninitiated, it looked like nothing more than a small Japanese-style room with four-and-a-half tatami mats. A kotatsu sat in the center, covered with oranges, maple manju cakes, a desk lamp, a teapot, a glass of half-finished juice, snack bags, promotional tissues, weekly magazines, and various other items. The TV across from the kotatsu was showing a daytime comedy program.

A comedian on the screen slapped his partner's back, and the audience erupted in laughter. Mihoshi, eating a manju while watching the TV, started laughing a beat late.

"Oh my, being so naughty in the middle of the day!"

Mihoshi felt around on the kotatsu for her teacup. As she began to sip, the remnants of laughter still on her face, she suddenly furrowedted her brows.

"It sounds like something is ringing."

Mihoshi looked around the room—which looked like a burglar had just been through it—and realized the sound was coming from the bracelet on her left arm.

"Oh no! It’s an emergency call!"

Still holding her teacup, Mihoshi hurriedly turned her wrist and, in the next instant, jumped up.

"Hot, hot, hot...!"

As she jumped, she barked her shin on the corner of the kotatsu, caught the cord of the desk lamp, and knocked over the glass of juice. In a panic to wipe it up, she grabbed a tissue box from a shelf, causing all the books in front of it to come raining down.

"Oh dear, what should I do?"

The emergency call continued to ring pitilessly. Mihoshi managed to wipe up the juice, but she left the rest of the mess as she started to run out, only to realize she was wearing a sweatshirt and a hanten coat.

Ultimately, another five minutes passed before Mihoshi finally arrived at the cockpit.

"You're late! What on earth were you doing!" Captain Nobeyama snapped from across the monitor.

"Sir! My apologies!" Despite the situation, Mihoshi saluted with a cheerful voice.

She was a disaster: bits of potato chips were stuck in her wavy hair, her coat buttons were misaligned by one hole revealing her undershirt, and a scrap of tissue was stuck to her hand.

"Er, Mihoshi-kun," Nobeyama cleared his throat. "First, look in a mirror. We'll talk after that."

Another three minutes passed before Mihoshi dashed into the restroom and returned.

"Are you ready now?"

Mihoshi nodded solemnly, but her mind was drifting away from the monitor and toward the state of the undershirt beneath her coat.

"Information has come in that the eternal criminal, Kagato, is heading toward your currently assigned sector—the Solar System. Therefore, First-Class Detective Mihoshi!"

Mihoshi fidgeted, desperately trying to stop her bra strap from sliding off her shoulder.

"If you detect a signature for Kagato, contact the Special Investigations Division immediately. We will handle the rest. You are to return to base promptly. Do you understand?"

Mihoshi snapped her head up. "Understood! I will definitely capture Kagato!"

Seeing Mihoshi salute so sharply, Nobeyama nearly keeled over. "That’s not it! You are Commander Kuramitsu’s granddaughter. If anything happens to you, the Chief and I will have to hang ourselves!"

Nobeyama’s true feelings had slipped out.

Mihoshi replied even more sharply, "Danger is a part of being in the Galaxy Police. Please do not worry about my grandfather."

Nobeyama’s face went blank for a moment. Then, in the next second, he shouted back in a panicked voice, "No! Mihoshi, were you even listening? Come back! I didn't say to capture him! Mihoshi!"

Mihoshi smiled brightly. "Oh, Captain, honestly. I’m a First-Class Detective too, you know. You don't have to be so worried about me!"

Mihoshi formed a V-sign and thrust it toward the monitor.

“Well then, I’m starting the special mission now! I’ll be engaging the shields, so we won’t be able to communicate, but please don’t worry. Wish luck to the Goddess of the Galaxy Police!”

“W-Wait! Mihoshi!”

Nobeyama’s face turned pale.

“Oh, that’s right. Could you tell Grandpa that I’m doing well?”

With a carefree voice saying, “Well, I’m off!” the communication cut out with a click. Nobeyama sat dazed in front of the monitor. He could not believe the events that had just unfolded.

“That shuttle is a custom-made model...” Nobeyama muttered sluggishly. “Once those shields are up, that’s it. No contact. No tracking.”

It occurred to Nobeyama that the terrifying task of reporting this situation to the Director was waiting for him.

“No, that girl can do it. She’s never failed at a job she said she’d do.”

And there wasn't a single time she said she was going, only to never return. Nobeyama exhaled the breath he had been holding and looked at the darkened monitor. The corners of his mouth relaxed slightly.

"That shuttle is a custom model, and most of its equipment is custom-made, too," Nobeyama repeated. "She's a fine detective, isn't she? Just the other day, she rammed a robber-murderer's shuttle; the criminal needed three months to recover, while she just walked away with a bandage on her forehead from the infirmary."

Nobeyama's expression softened even further.

"Alright. I'll report to the Director before I change my mind. If it comes to it, I'll be the one to face the music."

Nobeyama slowly rose from his seat, slowly brushed the dust off his jacket, and further adjusted his shoes.

Director Anderson—

Repeating the report in his mind, Nobeyama slowly left his seat.

Meanwhile, in the cockpit of the shuttle which had entered a storming level, Mihoshi, having adjusted her bra strap, was in the middle of calling up the ship's computer.

"Yukinojo!"

"Did you call for me, Mihoshi-dono?"

With a light mechanical whirring sound, a machine that looked like an electric monster with a single eyeball on a white umbrella appeared. It was the computer's external voice device, though if one looked closely, it wasn't entirely impossible to call it cute.

"Um, I think you were listening, but I want to know about Kagato."

"Understood."

Yukinojo joyfully switched the monitor display.

“Space Pirate Kagato. Also known as the Ruins Buster. Estimated age: five thousand years. A scoundrel who maneuvers a large combat ship called the *Soja* to pillage ruins across the galaxy.”

In sync with Yukinojo’s explanation, windows on the screen switched one after another.

“...To date, he has destroyed 3,326 ruins, and the number of precious cultural artifacts he has stolen is beyond counting...”

“Whoa.”

Mihoshi, who had been staring at the windows, let out a half-hearted exclamation of awe.

“This is no time to be impressed. I shall proceed to the details of every incident. Is that acceptable?”

“U-Uh-huh...”

Taking that response as consent, Yukinojo continued.

“Very well! ...Space Century 5901, the break-in at the Ruins Museum on Planet Alpha. The same year, the disappearance of two thousand tourists, including government officials, at the Mystery Zone on Planet Beta. Space Century 5903, the destruction of the ruin city groups on Planet Oura. Space Century 5904, the radio interference incident on Planet Skylark. Space Century 5912, the kidnapping of a young girl at the Royal Academy of Space Science on Planet Thodine... Hmm, it seems only this one has a different nature than the other incidents. After that, the mass capture of precious indigenous life forms on Planet Shiva. Space Century 5923, the intrusion into the Juraian Royal Palace on Planet Jurai. My apologies, this was the work of another pirate named Ryoko. Because the methods were so similar, a connection to Kagato was suspected, but the details of that remain unknown even now...”

As the incident files on the screen flipped by one after another, Yukinojo continued to speak rapidly about the details of all 3,326 incidents.

Mihoshi let out a large yawn. Next, she took a white, fur-like pom-pom hanging from her waist and crushed it with both hands. The pom-pom transformed into a transparent Rubik’s Cube, and Mihoshi began to turn the cube with light clicking sounds. As the readers likely know well, this was the deployment key for that sub-space personal locker that could hold anything from laundry to spaceships.

The cockpit's dust chute opened, and trash began to flow backward. Seeing this, Mihoshi hurriedly turned the cube from a different angle. The cockpit lights flickered. Mihoshi looked up at the ceiling and began flipping the cube over, twisting and turning it minutely.

A spare blaster appeared in mid-air. Next, a keyboard, a notebook, a travel toothbrush set, and writing utensils appeared, raining down on Mihoshi in a heap.

"Aww... I just wanted it to serve some coffee!"

Overhearing that voice, Yukinojo shouted loudly.

"Mihoshi-dono! Are you listening properly? Mi—"

The audio cut off mid-sentence because Mihoshi had switched it off.

"Sorry, Yukinojo."

Mihoshi flipped the engine switch and gave the panel at her feet a kick.

"The point is, I just have to catch him, right? Well, for now, let's try cruising around this area."

Mihoshi's hand pushed up the throttle lever. Leaving a trail of light behind it, the shuttle shot off toward Earth.

Chapter 12:

On Another Note...

On another note, things were hectic at the Kamidake Onsen...

After being chased by the earth spirit and circling the grounds, Ayeka and Ryoko returned to the women's bath. What met their eyes were Tenchi and Sasami, with Tenchi holding the hilt of the Tenchi Sword—more accurately, just the hilt—while looking around the area. Perhaps because he had been in such a rush, Tenchi was still shirtless.

"Hey! Tenchi!"

"Lord Tenchi!"

The joyful voices of the two reached Tenchi's ears.

"Alright, I'm leaving the rest to you!"

"Tenchi-niichan, do your best!"

Ryoko ran right past Tenchi and fled behind him, with Ayeka and Sasami following her lead.

"W-Wait a minute!"

Tenchi looked at the approaching earth spirit and shouted toward the three who had hidden behind the rocks.

"The blade won't come out! How am I supposed to do this? Dammit..."

Faced with the spirit, Tenchi desperately swung the sword hilt around, but he was easily sent flying by a single blow from the creature.

"Hiee—!"

Ah...!

Ayeka reflexively leaned out from her hiding spot.

“Lord Tenchi! Remember your training!”

The earth spirit turned toward that voice. It began to stomp heavily toward Ayeka and the others.

“Kyaaaaaa!”

Ayeka and the girls screamed and began to run.

“Ayeka-san!”

Tenchi chased after the spirit, biting his lip in frustration and desperation.

Dammit, at a time like this... I promised I would protect Ayeka-san.

Ayeka’s words from earlier flashed through his mind.

“That’s it, the training!”

He held the Tenchi Sword in a central stance. He unified his spirit, tightened his wrists, and relaxed his shoulders. A blade of light extended smoothly.

He did it!

Tenchi entered a state of empty mind and charged straight at the earth spirit.

Slash!

The spirit’s left arm was severed, and a terrible scream rang out.

“Did I get it!?”

Tenchi quickly turned around, intending to deliver the finishing blow. However, the severed arm of the spirit wobbled violently as it fused back into the main body.

“Ugh...”

Tenchi turned pale.

Is this sword no good? Or is this guy like a slime, just sticking back together no matter how many times I cut him?

Trapped in a stalemate, Tenchi backed away with his sword ready. It was then that the earth spirit stopped moving. An unpleasant vibrational sound that pressured the ears could be heard. Both the spirit and Tenchi looked up at the sky at the same time.

In one corner of the sky, a black hole had formed, looking as if that section of space had been hollowed out. The vibrating sound was coming from there.

“Mihoshi-dono! Mihoshi-dono!!”

Yukinojo called out in a voice that sounded desperate for a computer. Mihoshi was in the cockpit's pilot seat—right in front of Yukinojo's eyes—but as for what she was doing there, she had removed the bracelet from her left hand and was repeatedly shaking it and holding it to her ear.

“Mihoshi-dono!!” Yukinojo bellowed.

“Oh, yes... what’s wrong?”

Mihoshi finally looked up from the bracelet and stared at Yukinojo.

“A special energy pocket has formed at this point on the third planet. Currently, this ship is...”

Mihoshi looked down and started tinkering with the bracelet again.

“What should I do? It seems to be broken. It hasn’t responded at all for a while now. I wonder if spilling juice on it was a bad idea after all.”

“Mihoshi-dono!”

Yukinojo shouted with every ounce of his power.

“Y-Yes! Oh, you startled me.”

Mihoshi gave her instructions while thinking that she would probably have to take it apart to clean it.

“Umm... well, for now, please head toward that. We might find some kind of clue, right?”

“We are already heading there!”

Yukinojo's voice grew louder.

"This ship is currently falling toward the energy pocket! We are in an uncontrollable state!"

Mihoshi stared back at Yukinojo, taken aback.

"Since when has that been happening?"

"I have been displaying the flight path on the monitor for some time now!" Yukinojo snapped back. "Furthermore, I sounded the warning alarm and called you many times!"

Mihoshi looked at the monitor screen again—or rather, for the first time. The cone representing the shuttle was heading toward the center point of the monitor at a terrifying speed.

"Oh... this is bad! What should we do?"

"For now, we have no choice but to keep falling," came Yukinojo's blunt reply.

"A spacecraft!?"

Ryoko, who had been looking up at the pitch-black energy pocket, muttered. She had caught a glimpse of something that looked like the nose of a shuttle. Tenchi, who was also looking at the sky, turned toward Ryoko.

"I thought I saw something, too."

Ryoko had a bad feeling. Some idiot had undoubtedly been sucked into the energy pocket. Because the earth spirit's energy had concentrated, a distortion in space had occurred. Then, the tip of the shuttle became clearly visible.

"Tenchi, look out!"

Ryoko instantly teleported and grabbed Tenchi's arm. At the same moment, the entire shuttle appeared, lost its lift, and began to fall.

BOOM!

A shock like a spatial explosion hit the area. Suddenly, the flow of energy changed, and everything began to be sucked toward the energy pocket. A twisted pillar of water rose from the hot spring, and Tenchi's body floated up into the air.

"Uwaaaaaah!"

"Tenchi!"

Ryoko kicked off the air and chased after Tenchi. Once you entered that energy pocket, there was no telling where in the universe you would be thrown out. Then, a woman appeared in front of Tenchi. She was a quite beautiful woman with wavy blonde hair in a ponytail, wearing what appeared to be a uniform.

"Look out!"

Tenchi instinctively reached out and caught the woman. She was completely unconscious.

"What the hell are you doing!?"

A strong braking force was applied to Tenchi's body. Ryoko was holding Tenchi down from above.

"Where did you pick up that woman?"

"Just now, right there..."

"Hurry up and throw her away!" Ryoko shouted.

"W-Well, even if you say that..."

"Do you want to be saved, or do you want to be sucked into the energy pocket?"

Tenchi had no idea why Ryoko was so angry, but he couldn't just throw away an unconscious woman.

"Give me a break!" Tenchi finally yelled.

Suddenly, the flow of air stopped. Their current location was about three meters above the hot spring.

"Hieeeee—!"

With a textbook scream, Tenchi fell according to Newton's laws.

“Hmph!”

Ryoko looked down at the spectacular splash with her arms crossed.

“The moment he sees a woman, he’s all over her!”

Then, something sparkled on top of a rock.

“?”

Ryoko quickly teleported and picked up the shining object. It was Mihoshi’s bracelet.

“Galaxy Police...?”

Ryoko furrowed her brows, quickly stuffed the bracelet into her pocket, and vanished.

“My name is Mihoshi Kuramitsu.”

Half an hour later, in front of Tenchi who had finally regained consciousness on the floor of the changing room, Mihoshi began her self-introduction anew. Tenchi had been knocked unconscious by the shock of the fall and had been carried into this changing room along with the insensible Mihoshi.

In fact, there had been a nonsensical exchange between the earlier-awakened Mihoshi and the nursing Ayeka and Ryoko, but Tenchi, of course, knew nothing of it.

“Mihoshi... san?”

Tenchi held the back of his head. It felt like he had hit it quite hard. His head was still throbbing.

“Um, I heard that you saved me. Thank you so much.”

Mihoshi bowed deeply.

“You see, I was on patrol, chasing a dangerous criminal. Then, before I knew it, I was sucked into an energy pocket...”

Tenchi stared intently at the unknown woman sitting in a formal kneeling position before him.

Dangerous criminal? On patrol? What on earth is she talking about?

“She says she’s a detective for the Galaxy Police,” Ryoko added with a trace of a smirk on her face. “If I hadn’t found that bracelet, I would have thought she was some stupid runaway girl.”

“Who are you talking about?” Ayeka snapped, glaring at Ryoko.

“I’m not talking about you,” Ryoko shot back.

“Oh, please stop!”

Mihoshi clasped her hands together.

"Since I didn't know so many famous people were in a place like this, I've been in a total daze for a while now..."

Mihoshi stole a glance up at Ryoko.

"There's Ryoko-san, and Ryo-Ohki, and a Princess of the Juraian Royal Family," Mihoshi began to count them off on her fingers. "By the way, do you know about Ryo-Ohki?"

She stopped counting midway and pointed her bracelet toward Tenchi.

"Ryoko-san fixed this bracelet for me, but according to the data, she's a terrifying space pirate who destroyed twenty-eight planets and sixty-nine colonies. I had no idea she was such a cute creature..."

"Myaa-nn."

Tenchi glanced at Ryo-Ohki, who was happily gnawing on something resembling a gun atop Sasami’s head. He thought to himself that while he didn't really understand the details, he hadn't known any of that either.

"Um..."

As Tenchi stared at her so intently, Mihoshi's cheeks flushed a bright pink.

"Could you please not stare so much? I haven't... prepared myself mentally..."

Smack!

Ryoko cuffed Mihoshi on the back of the head.

"What was that for?!" Mihoshi turned around, her eyes welling with tears.

"What the hell are you thinking!?" Ryoko snapped.

"Ryoko-san. Violence is quite unseemly, you know," Ayeka added with a composed expression, perhaps harboring some ulterior motive. "It's not as if this person fell here out of malice."

"That's right~," Mihoshi muttered, her shoulders dropping in dejection. "Falling into a place like this... I don't know what to do..."

Tears began to overflow from Mihoshi's eyes.

"A-Ah, Mihoshi-san?" Tenchi didn't understand the situation at all, but he spoke the thought that had just flashed through his mind. "If I recall, there was a spaceship you came in. What happened to it?"

Mihoshi stared at Tenchi with watery eyes, then suddenly burst into loud sobs.

"I don't knoooow! I think it got pulled into an energy pocket. Without that ship, I can't return to the Galaxy Police, and I can't even contact them. Ohhh, I should have listened to what Yukinojo said. It's because I'm a clumsy, slowpoke turtle that things turned out like this...!"

Faced with Mihoshi wailing like a child, Tenchi thought frantically. *Galaxy Police... so, the Galactic Police? Anyway, she's a detective from there, she fell into that energy pocket, and this is the result. And since she has no ship, she can't go back...*

The color drained audibly from Tenchi's face. *Does this mean... another girl is going to be added to my household?*

He looked around with a start to find Ryoko, Ayeka, and Sasami all staring at his face.

"F-For the time being..." Tenchi continued in a low mumble, wondering what on earth had happened to his father. "...Since you seem to be in trouble, why don't you come with us?"

Mihoshi snapped her head up. "Really?"

"Yeah." Tenchi nodded with a smile, half out of desperation.

"Thank you so much!" Mihoshi's face became a mess of tears once again.

That night.

In the end, Tenchi and the others had been summoned by the furious proprietress—his grandmother—to help tidy up the room overturned by the earth spirit incident and assist with the delayed dinner. Nobuyuki was ordered to repair the fences and walls. They eventually collapsed into bed, so exhausted that the fact they had gained another stray girl hardly mattered anymore.

"Haaaaa..."

Tenchi collapsed face-down onto his futon and kicked the leg of Nobuyuki, who was similarly wiped out beside him.

"I told you so."

Nobuyuki lifted his head slightly and asked back, "Told me what?"

"The hot springs! I told you if we brought those girls to a place like this, it wouldn't end quietly."

"Did you say that?"

Tenchi buried his face in his pillow. "What are we going to do? Another weird one has joined the group."

"Are you talking about Mihoshi-san?" Nobuyuki shuffled onto his stomach, pulled over an ashtray, and lit a cigarette. "Isn't it fine? I heard it was a pitiful accident, and she is a girl, after all. She's quite cute; I think it's worth it for that point alone."

Tenchi let his head drop in defeat. *Ugh, I shouldn't have asked...*

Certainly, he wouldn't be a man if he hadn't reached out to help her back there. Asking her to come with them wasn't a mistake. But. Ayeka-san, Sasami-chan, and Ryoko. Even with just the three of them, things were this chaotic; he couldn't imagine what would happen with one more added to the mix.

Tenchi pictured the face of his grandfather, Katsuhito. He could practically see him laughing "Ho-ho-ho" and saying, *"Tenchi. If you eat the poison, you might as well lick the plate."*

"I bet Grandpa will be delighted," Nobuyuki muttered in a carefree voice. "Right, let's wrap up some money for the old lady and get out of here quickly."

T-This old man... Tenchi recoiled. He wasn't thinking about anything at all!

"Hey, Tenchi." Nobuyuki carefully crushed out his cigarette and pushed the ashtray away. "You don't want to be worked to the bone by the old lady while steam is coming out of her head, right? Money exists to be used at times like this."

Nobuyuki began mumbling his financial calculations. "We planned for three days and two nights, so the remainder can't be helped—maybe I'll just give it all to her. No, maybe she'll settle for half. But then again, considering we'll be in her care next year too, maybe my office should handle the repairs..."

Tenchi listened to Nobuyuki's monologue while lying limp. *Next year, huh? Next year. I don't even know if I'll be alive by next year.*

Exhausted, Tenchi's eyelids slid shut. A minute later, Nobuyuki was snoring loudly beside him.

In the women's room, Ayeka and Sasami had lined up their futons, and the newcomer Mihoshi had joined them; all three were fast asleep. Actually, Ayeka alone had been concerned about Ryoko's movements and kept her eyes open for a while after the other two fell silent, but she eventually succumbed to the day's fatigue and drifted off to sleep.

Despite the cold, Ryoko sat on the roof of the inn, her golden eyes wide open as she looked up at the late autumn full moon.

"Man... I'm beat today." Ryoko gave a wide yawn and stretched her body like a cat on the roof. "But, compared to being an astral body back in that shrine, I'm grateful to be here in the flesh like this."

Ryoko went to call out "Ryo-Ohki," but then remembered the creature was with Sasami.

"She really took a liking to Sasami. When she regenerated, she was fused with that kitten at Grandpa's place, so everything she does has become cat-like and she gets attached to people so easily. Well, whatever."

Ryoko yawned again and smirked as she remembered Mihoshi's crying face.

"Back then, I was startled because I thought she'd come to catch me, but it seems that wasn't it. Still, I wonder who she was chasing? She mentioned a heinous criminal."

Ryoko looked up at the sky and idly contemplated whether to sneak into Tenchi's room for a nighttime visit or go out somewhere to play. For some reason (which was rare for Ryoko), both options started to seem like too much trouble while she thought about them.

In the crystal-clear, transparent chill of the night air, bathed in the moonlight, memories of her days as a space pirate began to resurface. She and Ryo-Ohki had been peerless. They had traveled to so many planets. Back then, she never dressed like this. She was always in her battle suit. And she was always chasing treasure.

Ryoko visualized the various secret treasures she had plundered. A brilliant-cut blue diamond called the "Tears of Neptune." A pair of living statues called "The Beloved of the Gods"—though she'd thrown those away after finding out they were fakes. She had even broken into the Royal Academy of Science once after hearing they had the ultimate energy weapon. Ridiculously, it turned out to be just a vintage wine. Some prank-loving student must have spread the rumor, calling it the ultimate weapon of destruction that drives men's minds mad.

Only the Master Key of the Juraian Royal Family had eluded her. A smile played on Ryoko's lips. She had gone out of her way to take Ryo-Ohki and steal it, only to end up sealed away for seven hundred years, and in the end, the sword had been taken by Yosho's descendant.

Now, she had nothing left in her hands. No jewels, no weapons, not even the emerald-studded dresses. She had no weapons she could use, and there had been no man who made her want to adorn herself in beautiful gems or dresses. She had been too strong; every man either feared her or tried to flatter and use her.

Suddenly, Ryoko recalled the face of a certain man. A man with silver hair tied back in a ponytail and an icy smile on his refined face. He had golden eyes, just like her. Long ago, she had been born on that man's ship. He was a god, and a father. He had given her Ryo-Ohki and given her the world of space.

At first, she had raced through the universe at his beck and call. No matter what she brought back, the man was never pleased.

"Ryoko. You are a failure," he would say. *"You understand nothing. You should just go and play wherever you like, so long as you don't get in my way. You have power, but you lack true intelligence. That is your fatal flaw."*

Ryoko had never told this story to anyone. Not even to Tenchi. This was because remembering that man always left her with a freezing sensation.

"Kagato, huh..." Ryoko muttered the name she hadn't spoken in seven hundred years.

Suddenly, the moon was eclipsed. She looked up at the sky to see dark clouds slowly obstructing the moon as they drifted by. Feeling an indescribable chill, Ryoko clenched her fists.

"I'm losing it."

Ryoko vanished, teleporting into the deserted women's bath. As she floated above the water, dipping only her feet, a pleasant warmth spread through her body.

"I wanted to get in here alone with Tenchi..." Ryoko's whispered words sounded lonely, and she looked unusually childlike.

She cast a spherical barrier in the middle of the hot spring and curled up, enveloped in the warmth. Clutching her knees with her head down, she looked like a child with nowhere to belong.

Sasami was inside a dream.

Under a brilliantly shining full moon, the land of Jurai was parched, the Royal Palace was gone, and a gust of wind kicked up dust as it passed by. Only a massive tree towered high, its streamlined leaves rustling.

"Tsunami..." Sasami called out in the dream. Her thin voice was swallowed by the lifeless, dry earth before it could reach the tree.

"Where is everyone?" Sasami looked around anxiously. "I'm... scared."

A wind whipped up, making countless shadows dance. The surroundings turned dark abruptly. Great wings slowly began to blot out the full moon.

"Is that... a ship!?"

As a black ship with an ominous shape passed by, the area was swallowed by darkness. The ground beneath Sasami's feet crumbled. She could no longer tell if she was falling or rising.

Sasami was in pitch darkness. Then, a pale blue streak of light flew past. The lights gathered while flickering, and at the center, the silhouette of a dark man emerged. The shadow of the man, whose face was indiscernible, reached out and grabbed the dancing streaks of light. In an instant, a sword of pale blue light was formed.

Sasami felt terror and backed away. "Tsunami! Tsunami, help me!"

Pale blue flames rose from the sword of light. Raising the massive sword, which looked like the galaxy stretched thin, the man swung it straight down toward Sasami.

"Kyaaaa!"

She woke up at the sound of her own voice. "A dream of Tsunami... I haven't had one in a while."

Sasami sat up trembling and hugged her shoulders with both hands. "Who was that?"
That shadow...?

She looked around the room and noticed that Ryo-Ohki, who had been sleeping with her, was gone. "Ryo-Ohki? Ryo...-chan?"

Long ears were reflected on the paper sliding door. Relieved, Sasami got up, opened the window, and stepped out onto the veranda. "You were here?"

Sasami picked up Ryo-Ohki and rubbed her cheek against the creature. "Myau."
Ryo-Ohki licked Sasami's cheek, and Sasami let out a small laugh, finding it ticklish.

"I'm so silly. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Sasami went back to her futon holding Ryo-Ohki. She stroked the soft fur for a while before eventually falling into a deep sleep. And, of course, in the men's room, Tenchi and Nobuyuki were dead to the world, having kicked off their covers.

The moon revealed its shining face once more, illuminating the Masaki Shrine. The surroundings were hushed; even the sound of insects had ceased. The moon toyed for a while with the surface of the pond, which glittered with its reflection, and as it slowly tilted, it illuminated the top of the stone cavern.

Inside the shrine, which had long lost its master, darkness coiled blackly. Deep within the shrine... the pale blue phosphorescence that once filled the inner sanctum had vanished, and only the sound of water continued to murmur incessantly.

Then, a light flickered into existence in the center. Illuminated by that green flame, the shadow of a tall man emerged. The flame left the man's hand and floated up slowly, lighting the entire inner sanctum. The man's refined profile was edged by the fire, and shadows danced restlessly.

"So this is where Ryoko slept," the man murmured. "I see, a powerful barrier... First Prince of the Juraian Royal Family, why stay in a place like this when you possess such power?"

The man—no, Kagato—suddenly cut his words short. "...No, I shall wait until the pieces are all gathered. Prince, I will return. The next time I appear, you will be kneeling at my feet, offering up that sword."

An icy smile rose to Kagato's lips. "Taking it by force is not to my taste."

Kagato’s form wavered, and the water's surface rippled. The flame vanished abruptly, and at the same moment, Kagato’s figure disappeared like a phantom.

Katsuhito was in deep meditation, sitting in zazen in the main hall where the moonlight streamed in. Normally he would have been asleep long ago, but something in his heart held him back and disturbed his slumber.

Then, the faint remaining chirps of insects stopped completely. Katsuhito remained motionless, straining his five senses.

Who is it!? He didn't speak the words, only asked within his mind. There was no answer. There could be none.

Katsuhito stood up smoothly and descended into the precincts with almost no sound. He walked down the stone steps and came to the edge of the pond. Beneath the brilliantly shining moon, the sacred tree, Funaho, towered high, its streamlined leaves rustling in the breeze.

Katsuhito looked up at Funaho in silence. A faint wind teased his cheeks. The leaves rustled, flickering their silver undersides as if shivering. Suddenly, the wind stopped. A suffocating silence filled the air.

"The presence of evil..."

Katsuhito looked back toward the deserted Masaki house. The guardians acting as gateposts showed no change. He quietly turned on his heel and began to climb the stone steps leading back to the precincts.

He thought it was fortunate that *he* wasn't there. He had expected that if the seal on the Tenchi Sword were broken, someone would appear to target it, just as they had with Ryoko.

I too once took up the Tenchi Sword and sealed the evil of this land. But after realizing the weight of that, I sealed the sword deep within a barrier and lived as an ordinary human, never killing anyone. That was because I didn't want this beautiful land defiled by anyone, and also because I was guarding the Tenchi Sword, waiting for the time to come.

The time to come... yes, for the birth of one who would inherit the contract of the Tenchi Sword.

"Tenchi..." Katsuhito murmured.

I can do nothing to help you other than train you. The Tenchi Sword certainly recognized your blood. But the true contract is something you must forge yourself. And forging a contract means offering up your life. For what will you stake your life? That is for you to choose, and for you to decide. It is not an abstract word like justice, love, or even the Royal Family; when the heart finds it, the contract will be forged. It cannot be told in words. When the time comes, you will understand. But how painful it is to make you walk this path.

Katsuhito stopped and looked across the precincts. The presence of evil had vanished. He slowly sat down on the veranda.

If Tenchi had not been born—

Bitter memories resurfaced. *I would have left the Tenchi Sword sealed in this land, never to be released. No, I should have decided on that once before. Since I had abandoned the Royal Family to begin with, I intended to seal the Tenchi Sword along with its contract in this land... the home of my mother, Funaho, and watch over it until my life ended. Yes, when that incident happened...*

That was thirty-four years ago. It was when his daughter... Tenchi's mother, Achika, was born and turned fifteen. From a young age, the blood of Jurai had appeared strongly in Achika. She could speak with Funaho and see spirits. No such child had ever been born before.

And so he had thought: *This child can inherit the contract; I can lay down my burden...* Achika had said, *"If that is my father's wish."*

The scene from that time rose vividly in the mind of Katsuhito—no, Yosho, the First Prince of the Juraian Royal Family.

It was thirty-four years ago. He had taken Achika, who had just turned fifteen, to the shrine. Achika, a quiet girl, followed behind him in silence.

"Achika. The Tenchi Sword is here. My training you in the sword, showing you Funaho's memories, and telling you of my past—it was all for this moment. Will you take over my contract?"

Achika nodded. She closed her eyes for a moment as if resolving herself, and then she drew the Tenchi Sword. He had erected a barrier for that moment only, so that Ryoko’s seal would not be broken.

The Tenchi Sword glowed in Achika's hand, and a blade of light appeared. He watched with wide eyes. It was reacting to Achika's blood... to the royal blood within his daughter.

Achika recited the words of the contract exactly as he had taught her.

"My ship, Funaho. In the true name of Tsunami, the progenitor of the Royal Family and mother of all, the first ship, grant me power and forge a contract with me."

And then, a crest was supposed to appear on Achika's forehead.

Suddenly, the sword of light shattered. Achika collapsed and began to writhe in pain. He could feel Achika's life aura rapidly fading.

"Father..." Achika still tried gallantly to sit up. "Achika lied to you. I tried to forge the contract while deceiving my own heart. I... I knew."

"What? What on earth did you know!?" He pulled Achika up into his arms. "There is no way Funaho would not accept you. What exactly did you falsify?"

"My heart..."

The Tenchi Sword rose from Achika's hands and settled back into its original resting place. Katsuhito picked up the unconscious Achika and returned to the shrine. He had truly believed she was going to die.

Achika did not die, but her life force had grown so weak that there was nothing to be done. Throughout the entire winter, she remained bedridden. It was then that Katsuhito learned the truth: Achika had fallen in love with a young man from the village. While she lay ill, that young man had found another woman and left. Loving such an unfaithful man, Achika must have been torn between the pressure to meet her father's expectations and her own desire to live as an ordinary human.

Katsuhito felt he had been foolish for failing to see his daughter's true feelings. Seven hundred years had passed since he descended to this land and sealed Ryoko. Supported by the Waters of Life in the land of Jurai, he had never known the sting of aging, but now he felt it, and the burden of sealing the Tenchi Sword weighed heavily upon him. That impatience had shortened Achika's life. The false contract, in exchange for giving Achika power and life, had ultimately snatched it away.

Noticing that dawn was breaking, Katsuhito gazed out at the shrine grounds for a moment. A year after those events, Achika had recovered enough to stand again and married an older man named Nobuyuki. Achika had laughed, saying, "He looks just like you, Father. I've never even seen him angry. He is so big-hearted; just being with him makes everything wonderful." She had looked truly happy. A year later, Tenchi was born. It was Achika who gave him the name Tenchi. Five years passed like a dream.

Achika.

The image of his daughter as she was in those days surfaced in Katsuhito's mind. *Forgive me...*

Then, the dream appeared again. It was the dream he had seen the night Achika died. Every time he thought of asking for her forgiveness, this vision would manifest.

"Father. I am with Tsunami now. I received a gift from her. When that child... when Tenchi turns fifteen, please send him to me. Until then... I will be protecting him."

The morning sun began to stain the ridgeline. Katsuhito stood up, entered the office, and began organizing the mail that had accumulated over the past few days.

Achika, I have raised Tenchi just as you asked. I do not understand the meaning behind your words to 'send him to you,' but if that means unsealing the Tenchi Sword once more, I have made sure he polished his swordsmanship and underwent training so he would be ready whenever that day came. And so, I enticed Tenchi and had him break the seal.

Tenchi is a mysterious child. Without knowing anything, he took up the sword and drew out its power. He possesses a gentle, straightforward heart. His gaze... yes, it resembles yours. If you weren't protecting him, how could a motherless boy have grown up to be so upright? That is what I have come to believe lately. It is you who guides Tenchi, while Nobuyuki and I merely watch over him.

If it was also you who sent Ayeka and the others... then Tenchi is undergoing a great trial.

Katsuhito remembered the bickering between Ryoko and Ayeka and couldn't help but smile. However, for Tenchi, who grew up in a house without a single woman’s touch, perhaps it was a necessary ordeal—both to maintain his sense of self and to learn about the world.

Tenchi...

Katsuhito suddenly recalled a demonic presence. That... that was no mere evil spirit or vengeful ghost. It wasn't something small like a land spirit or a common monster. That entity had come to this land with a specific purpose. It harbored a terrifying amount of energy... even if what had appeared here was a mere shadow of it.

"Tsunami. Tsunami, the Ship of the Beginning, whose name alone is known."

Katsuhito whispered the words aloud.

"In the name of Masaki Yosho Jurai, I pray: protect Tenchi from the darkness."

The chirping of sparrows that had arrived in the courtyard signaled the start of an ordinary day to Katsuhito's ears as he offered his prayer.

Chapter 13:

Hey, Mihoshi!

"Mihoshi! Hey, Mihoshi!"

"Wha-huh?"

"Could you please move? Don't go dozing off in a place like this."

After breakfast, Ayeka entered from the hallway, uncharacteristically dragging a clattering vacuum cleaner. Mihoshi had been napping on the sofa, her long legs sprawled out as she nearly slid onto the floor.

"Oka-a-ay."

Mihoshi let out a sound that was somewhere between a reply and a yawn, curled up on the sofa, and fell right back to sleep. Despite the loud, obnoxious roaring of the vacuum cleaner Ayeka was making, there was no sign that Mihoshi intended to wake up or help out. Finally, Ayeka tossed the vacuum aside and glared intensely at Mihoshi.

"My goodness! How can someone sleep so blissfully while another person is working so hard to clean?"

Ryoko appeared at that moment.

"What are you doing bringing the vacuum out? Aren't you supposed to be watering the plants?"

"I am, but this person was sleeping so peacefully that I simply couldn't stand it..."

Ryoko looked down at the woman curled up on the sofa with her long limbs tucked in and said matter-of-factly, "Then just wake her up."

"I *was* trying to wake her up!"

"With a vacuum cleaner? Man, you're pretty spiteful." Ryoko smirked.

"I am not being spiteful!" Ayeka snapped back. "Besides, wasn't vacuuming supposed to be *your* job, Ryoko? You've been slacking off for an entire week! Look, the carpet is covered in dust!"

"Shut up. I don't want to hear it from someone who only picks up the vacuum once in a blue moon."

Just then, Mihoshi sat up while rubbing her eyes.

"Excuse me, but could you please not fight right over my head?"

Ryoko and Ayeka (not that they had become friends) looked down at Mihoshi and shouted in unison:

"I don't want to hear that from someone who was napping!"

The two looked at each other, huffed, and turned away. Mihoshi looked back and forth between their faces for a moment before smiling and asking a question.

"Well, I'm wide awake now, so is there anything I can help with?"

Ayeka thrust the vacuum cleaner toward her. "This!"

Seizing that split-second opening, Ryoko vanished.

It had been one week since they returned from the hot springs. With the addition of Mihoshi, the six members of the Masaki household divided the chores among themselves.

Sasami handled the meal preparation; Ayeka took care of watering the plants and keeping the house tidy; Ryoko was assigned vacuuming and heavy lifting (under the logic that her ability to pass through walls was convenient). Washing the dishes and cleaning the toilets were done on a rotation. Laundry was handled individually, but a rotation was set for specific days of the week.

Tenchi worked in the fields (mostly the carrot patch for Ryo-Ohki and other vegetables), and since Nobuyuki commuted to his office in Okayama during the week, he handled carpentry and repairs. Mihoshi, the newest addition, was assigned the morning cleaning of the Masaki Shrine, a job no one else wanted to do. While her enthusiasm for waking up early and working hard was good, she tended to get sleepy after breakfast and would usually occupy the sofa for a nap, making her a nuisance to the others.

Except for Ryoko, whose enthusiasm fluctuated, everyone generally performed their duties diligently. Especially in Ayeka’s case, considering she was a sheltered princess who had never lifted anything heavier than a pair of chopsticks, it was a remarkable improvement.

Ryoko was inside the Aerial Hot Spring. The Aerial Hot Spring was a facility she had constructed in just three days after returning from the Kamidake Hot Springs, applying techniques she had learned during her days as a space pirate for the exclusive use of the Masaki family.

At the entrance hung an indigo-dyed curtain that said "Women" on one side and "Tenchi" on the other. It was a curtain that made Ryoko's blatant desires obvious to anyone who saw it.

"Phew... A morning nap, morning sake, and a morning bath. This is absolute paradise."

Ryoko whispered with a cup in hand, her face flushed a soft cherry pink.

"Excuse me."

The door rattled open, and Ayeka entered quietly.

"Slacking off on cleaning again... I knew you'd be here." Ayeka turned her nose up and dipped her feet into the tub.

"Come on, how about a drink?" Feeling good from the alcohol, Ryoko placed a flask and a cup on a tray and pushed it toward Ayeka.

"Alcohol in the morning! Honestly!"

"Don't be like that. Here."

Ayeka finally took the cup and downed it in one go, as if acting out of desperation.

"Oh, you can actually hold your liquor. Here, have another."

"....."

Ryoko kept filling the cup, and as Ayeka drank in her desperate mood, her speech began to slur.

"I haven't... I haven't forgiven you yet, you know!!"

"What, are you still mad about the Kamidake trip? Hey, we were only there for a day anyway. It's a shame you couldn't make Tenchi yours."

Ryoko let out a loud, cackling laugh, and Ayeka glared at her.

"How vulgar! Listen here. Tenchi-sama and I are bonded by noble blood. We are nothing like a monster like you!"

"Who are you calling a monster!?"

Their familiar argument began. What was slightly different this time was that Mihoshi joined in.

"Are we talking about Tenchi? Let me join in too!"

Ryoko and Ayeka turned around, startled.

"When did you get here!?"

"I just arrived," Mihoshi answered curiously.

To get behind me without me noticing... she's not to be underestimated, Ryoko thought privately. *So this is how she sneaks up on criminals. I guess she really is a Galaxy Police detective.* (In reality, they probably just hadn't heard her because of their shouting, but regardless.)

Mihoshi took a cup, poured herself some sake without being asked, and started talking while she drank.

"When I was about to be sucked into that energy pocket, Tenchi saved me, right? Well, at that time—or rather, after that—I thought to myself: this must be what they call a fateful encounter."

Mihoshi’s face turned bright red.

"I mean, even though he's younger, Tenchi is so polite, and gallant, and cute. *Kyaaa!*" Mihoshi covered her face with both hands. "It's strange, isn't it? Since we only just met. But I felt it... destiny... Oh dear, I'm so embarrassed..."

Mihoshi continued to hug her cup and mutter "Oh my, oh my," while Ayeka and Ryoko stared at her profile in stunned silence, unable to find words.

This one... might be a more formidable opponent than Ryoko, Ayeka thought. Ryoko, for her part, was wishing she had just forced Mihoshi back into the energy pocket when she had the chance.

"So, Ayeka-san, Ryoko-san, who do you two like? Is it Tenchi after all?"

Mihoshi finally stopped her "oh my-ing" and asked. Ryoko and Ayeka nearly choked.

"Oh, what's wrong? Hey, Ryoko-san? Ayeka-san?"

Then, the door rattled open again.

"Hey, sisters, what should we do for lun—wow, it reeks of alcohol in here!"

Sasami backed away while holding her nose. Ryo-Ohki darted past her feet and jumped into the room.

"Meow, meow, meow, meow!"

"Oh, Ryo-Ohki! You're the only one who understands me."

Ryo-Ohki struggled in Ryoko's arms and let out an angry-sounding growl.

"Ryo-Ohki!?"

A spine-chilling terror was transmitted from Ryo-Ohki.

"What!?"

The air vibrated, and a green orb of light appeared in mid-air. Ayeka and Mihoshi stared at the light, frozen. Then, the orb split open, and a tall man floated in the air.

"I’ve finally found you, Ryoko!"

"Ka... Kagato!!"

Ryoko’s body moved on instinct. In an instant, she teleported and shifted into her combat costume. Kagato reached out casually, attempting to seize her. At that moment:

"Eeeeek! A pervert! Pervert!!"

Simultaneously, every object in the vicinity came flying at him.

A man who expected nothing to happen when barging into a women's bath was strange enough, but a GP detective who mistook a criminal for a common groper was also questionable. Kagato decided to ignore Ayeka and Mihoshi for the moment and slammed a shockwave directly into Ryoko.

Hearing Ryoko's pained cry, Mihoshi gasped. "You...! Wait!"

Kagato scooped up the limp Ryoko effortlessly. He spared a single glance for Mihoshi and vanished instantly. Mihoshi's bracelet began reacting violently.

"Who was... that!?"

Just as Ayeka asked, the door burst open.

"What happened!?"

Tenchi, sensing something was wrong, had rushed in. "Ah—!"

Tenchi turned bright red and bolted back out with the same momentum he had entered with. Mihoshi clicked her bracelet to silence the alert.

"There's no mistake. Ayeka-san, that was the legendary permanent wanted criminal... Kagato!!"

"Kagato!?" Ayeka and Sasami asked in unison.

"Here! He's right here!"

Mihoshi, leveling her blaster, and Tenchi and the others, who were following closely behind her while scanning the area, stopped at the same time. The snow that had begun to flutter down since morning was being absorbed silently into the surface of the pond.

"Kagato, the permanent wanted criminal!! I know you're there. Come out!"

Mihoshi aimed her blaster squarely at the sacred tree, Funaho. A low, muffled chuckle was heard, and Kagato's form appeared in front of Funaho.

"I apologize for earlier, Princess Ayeka, Princess Sasami. I had to do that, or else this one would have escaped me."

Something thudded to the ground at the feet of Kagato, who was floating in mid-air, and materialized.

"Ryoko!!"

Tenchi instinctively ran over and scooped up her unconscious body.

Kagato didn't give the two of them a single glance; instead, he looked down at Ayeka with a composed air.

"This 'Ryoko' is my property, but she's a nimble thing for a failure. I hope she didn't cause you any trouble, Princess Ayeka. For instance, regarding the treasures of the Juraian Royal Family."

Ayeka shuddered, instinctively shielding Sasami as she stepped backward.

"What did you do to Ryoko!?" Tenchi shouted.

Kagato spared a brief glance for Tenchi, but addressed Ayeka again in a soft, polite tone.

"It seems the peanut gallery is too noisy for us to talk. Princess Ayeka, why don't we find a quiet place without interruptions to have a long chat?"

Ayeka bit her trembling lip and glared back at Kagato with forced courage.

"What is your objective?"

"Objective? I simply wish to know. Why are you, and someone associated with the Juraian Royal Family, here in this place?"

Kagato descended slowly and extended a hand toward Ayeka.

"Don't move!"

Mihoshi cut in between them as if to protect Ayeka.

"Kagato, permanent most-wanted criminal! You're under arrest! This is a Special Protected Area. Any form of interference is forbidden. If you involve the residents, I'll shoot to kill immediately!"

Kagato raised a hand dismissively, looking annoyed.

"Well now, if it isn't Director Kuramitsu's granddaughter? What are you doing in a place like this? Overworked yourself into a frontier assignment again, have you?"

"Guh..."

Mihoshi fired her blaster in rapid succession, set to shock mode. The beams were blocked by Kagato's shield, failing to leave even a scratch.

"Then how about this?" Kagato smiled serenely. "I shall have you come to my ship, the Souja. We should be able to talk there to our heart's content."

Kagato drew closer, spreading his arms wide as if welcoming them.

"Please don't misunderstand. I have no intention of harming any of you. I simply have something on my mind."

Suddenly, Kagato's movements stopped. Tenchi had stepped in his way, brandishing the Tenchi-Ken. Tenchi's hands were trembling slightly, but the sword was emitting a powerful light.

Kagato looked Tenchi over slowly with interest before finally speaking.

"So, you were the one holding it. However, that belongs to a ruler. If you brandish it recklessly, you'll only get hurt."

"What are you talking about!?" Tenchi shot back in a raspy voice.

It was terrifying. Just standing there, his entire nervous system seemed to scream at the overwhelming difference in power.

"Young man," Kagato said in a quiet voice. "They say the foolish know no fear, but there is no need to throw your life away. What do you intend to do by waving that sword around?"

"Get out of here!!" Tenchi forced the words through his clenched teeth.

"Do you intend to defeat me?" Kagato's voice remained perfectly calm. "Intriguing. Since you're the one who brought it up, I expect you to keep me entertained."

Kagato thrust out a hand clad in a white glove. With a roar, a blizzard whipped up, shredding Tenchi’s clothes.

"Ugh...!"

Tenchi held the Tenchi-Ken vertically, desperately trying to stand his ground. This was no ordinary storm; it was a blizzard that sought to slice his body like wind-sickles.

"Spirit alone will get you nowhere. Look at you—you can barely even stand, can you?" Kagato's voice reached him through the howling wind. "I'll be taking that sword now."

The sword? He meant the Tenchi-Ken? So he was after this blade...

Suddenly, Kagato's hand lunged forward. Tenchi's hands were frozen, and he was barely able to keep his grip on the weapon. At this rate, it would be taken.

Just then, a lithe shadow slammed its entire weight into Tenchi.

"Tenchi! Don't let him have it!!"

It was Ryoko. Tenchi and Ryoko tumbled out of the blizzard's range together, and Kagato pulled his hand back in surprise.

"Ryoko, is it? You've developed some interesting reactions in the short time I haven't seen you. What do you find so appealing about that boy?"

Tenchi noticed that Ryoko's body, which had shielded him, was trembling slightly.

"Get lost!" Ryoko spat out. "Just try laying a hand on him—I'll cut you down!"

"Ho..."

Kagato manifested a sword of pale blue light, similar to Ryoko's, and swung it with a hum.

"Quite the spirited one, aren't we? Do my words no longer reach your ears?"

For a moment, Kagato's eyes took on an eerie glow, and his sword's radiance intensified. Ryoko suddenly clutched her head and began to moan in pain. The gems on her left hand pulsed with light.

"What's wrong, Ryoko!?" Tenchi turned around in shock.

The light faded from Ryoko's eyes, and her expression became vacant in an instant.

"What did you do!?"

Tenchi raised his sword, preparing to strike at Kagato. At that exact moment, Ryoko gripped Tenchi’s neck from behind in a chokehold.

"Ryoko!?"

Her strength was incredible. No matter how he tried to shake her off, her arms remained locked around his neck; he could barely breathe.

"What... did you... do to Ryoko!?" Tenchi managed to choke out.

"Did I not just tell you that she is my property?"

Kagato descended slowly through the air, looking down at Tenchi from about fifty centimeters above the ground.

"She was originally created to be exactly that—my hands and feet. Now, what will you do?"

Kagato smiled and carelessly pointed his sword at Tenchi.

"If you were truly the owner of that sword, you never would have let someone like Ryoko get behind you. Young man, that sword is a treasure of the Juraian Royal Family, said to be the key that releases the greatest energy in the universe. I believe it was called a 'Master Key,' was it not, Princess Ayeka?"

Kagato spoke without even turning around.

"I have spent five thousand long years searching for that energy. It was only about seven hundred years ago that I learned the key to unlocking that secret lay within the Juraian Royal Palace. As expected, it wasn't something a creature like Ryoko could easily steal away. Afterward, I was preoccupied with the final adjustments to my ship, the Souja, which is why my meeting with all of you was delayed."

Kagato’s expression as he looked down at Tenchi was cold and devoid of emotion.

"Young man, I ask you. Since you hold that sword, it means you have the right to answer. Are you a person worthy of that sword?"

Kagato seemed to be waiting for something.

"Can you not answer? If you persist in this pointless stubbornness, you'll start to think death is preferable. I ask you once more: are you a person worthy of that sword?"

"How the hell should I know!?" Tenchi reflexively yelled in a strained voice.

Kagato’s expression grew stern. "So you intend to remain stubborn to the end."

Kagato gave a small nod toward Ryoko. Immediately, she tightened her grip on Tenchi's neck with terrifying force.

"Urgh..."

Tenchi's vision blurred, and a reddish-black darkness began to descend. Just as he thought it was over, Ryoko’s grip suddenly loosened. Ryo-Ohki had bitten into Kagato’s hand.

The unexpected attack must have broken his mental control over Ryoko. Instinctively, Tenchi threw off Ryoko’s arms and slashed at Kagato.

Kagato dodged at the last possible second. A cut opened on his cheek, and blue blood oozed out. For an instant, Kagato’s face twisted into a terrifying mask of rage.

"Come!! I shall test whether or not you are a true wielder!"

Kagato raised his pale blue greatsword and brought it crashing down toward Tenchi. The energy behind the blow felt like it would break his arms. Tenchi caught the blade directly in front of his face and desperately parried the following strikes. The speed and power were incomparable to his training sessions with his grandfather.

Tenchi was immediately forced onto the defensive and blown back to the edge of the pond. The shock of the landing caused the light of the Tenchi-Ken to flicker and fade away.

"Tedious... To think you made me waste so much time."

Kagato reached out his hand again. The sword slipped from Tenchi’s weakened grasp and floated toward Kagato’s hand as if being sucked in.

Suddenly, the Tenchi-Ken abruptly changed direction and flew behind Kagato.

"Who goes there!?"

"What do you think you're doing, playing around with someone else's belongings?"

Appearing along with the voice was Tenchi's grandfather, Katsuhito. The Tenchi-Ken was now firmly in his hand.

Kagato smirked and shot a glance at the fallen Ryoko.

"Ryoko, I'll give you one last chance. Go!"

As Kagato whispered the command, Ryoko’s body rose like a marionette and vanished into thin air.

"So you've shown yourself, First Prince of the Juraian Royal Family! Then you shall be the one to show me the power of the universe's secret treasure!" Kagato called out in a booming voice.

"Secret treasure? I don't know what you're talking about. I know a few secret hot springs, though."

"Stop fooling around!"

Kagato released a shockwave from his hand. Katsuhito tilted his head slightly, letting the shockwave pass him by.

"The greatest energy in the universe? There is no such thing. Even if there were, it is not something a human can control."

Ayeka listened to the exchange between the two, her breath hitched. The words Kagato had spoken—*First Prince of the Juraian Royal Family*—were swirling in her mind.

My brother... my brother...

Though the man called the First Prince who now held the Tenchi-Ken looked nothing like the Yosho of his youth, Ayeka somehow knew it was the truth. Her legs shook, and a scream sat at the back of her throat, but her mouth was bone-dry; only a wordless gasp escaped her.

"I have wandered the universe for ages to know that power. What is required? Strength? The blood of the Juraian Royal Family?"

Kagato lunged, and in the blink of an eye, he swung his greatsword down. With a high-pitched metallic screech, the greatsword was repelled. A shield of light had formed in front of Katsuhito.

"The Wings of the Light Hawk!?"

Kagato struck with ferocious intensity, but the Wings of the Light Hawk shifted positions with a shimmer, parrying every single attack. Katsuhito stood in a natural stance, holding the Tenchi-Ken. Seeing Kagato pull back his sword, Katsuhito took a step forward.

The Wings of the Light Hawk vanished, and a blade of light extended from the hilt of the Tenchi-Ken.

"Now, I'm coming!!"

Katsuhito began a fierce counterattack. Tenchi crawled onto one of the roots protruding over the pond's surface, watching the battle in wide-eyed amazement.

The shield of light... the thing Kagato called the Wings of the Light Hawk was the same thing he had seen in Funaho's memories. So, was his grandfather really the First Prince of Jurai, just as Kagato said? The man fighting on equal terms with Kagato was *his* grandpa?

Katsuhito cornered Kagato and pointed the Tenchi-Ken directly at him. Suddenly, arrows of light rained down from above.

"Ryoko!"

With an expressionless face, Ryoko charged in, attacking with energy waves. Katsuhito leaped away and roared at the top of his lungs.

"You coward, using a woman as a shield!!"

It was a look of rage Tenchi had never seen from him before.

"Grandpa, please don't kill Ryoko!" Tenchi shouted instinctively.

At that voice, Kagato turned around, and Tenchi felt as though he saw the man smirk.

"Grandpa!!"

Katsuhito parried Ryoko's incoming blade with the Wings of the Light Hawk and jumped into the air. Ryoko followed immediately, reaching out for the Tenchi-Ken. Katsuhito grabbed her wrist, and the Tenchi-Ken flashed in a single stroke.

"Ryoko! Wake up!!"

"Ugh...!"

Her left wrist, along with the gems, was sliced off. Ryoko’s eyes snapped open, and a moment later, she fell with a scream.

"Ryoko!!"

Tenchi saw Ryoko fall into the pond and tried to run to her. Kagato suddenly appeared before him, passing so close his robes brushed Tenchi's shoulder.

"Impressive, Yosho!" Kagato’s voice rang out.

Katsuhito was kneeling on a stepping stone leading to Funaho.

"As expected of the First Prince of Jurai. But if you've only shown me your skill with the Tenchi-Ken, then my coming all this way was hardly worth the effort. What are you planning, Yosho? Do you mean to say that an attack of this level isn't enough to make you reveal your secret techniques?"

An arrow of light flew past, grazing Kagato. Katsuhito spread his empty hands and looked back at Kagato with a calm expression.

"What!?"

Kagato instinctively looked behind him. The Tenchi-Ken was embedded in the trunk of Funaho.

"What is the meaning of this?" Kagato furrowed his brows suspiciously, backing away without taking his eyes off Katsuhito. "Have you given up?"

Everyone present watched the Tenchi-Ken with bated breath.

To save us? Tenchi wondered. *To protect me?* Ayeka bit her lip, filled with complex emotions. Mihoshi stood ready to shoot if anything happened, and Sasami simply watched Kagato while trembling.

Kagato grabbed the Tenchi-Ken and tried to pull it out. At that moment, lightning surged from Funaho through the sword, and Kagato’s body was engulfed in intense sparks.

"Aaaaaagh!"

Kagato backed away with a beast-like cry. Tenchi couldn't believe his eyes. Nothing had happened when he held it. Was that also the power of the Tenchi-Ken?

"That sword is not for the likes of you to touch! Only those of the Juraian Royal Family can draw out its power."

Katsuhito remained seated quietly, staring down Kagato, who was holding his right hand and breathing heavily.

Kagato suddenly realized. Why Yosho had stayed hidden until now. Why that boy had been holding the Tenchi-Ken.

"I see..." Kagato turned his haggard face toward Katsuhito. "You were training a successor. That boy is your heir. I was brilliantly deceived. You are quite the tactician, Yosho."

Strangely, Kagato's expression softened.

"In respect for your plan, I shall withdraw for now. Ryoko!!"

At Kagato's call, Ryoko's head drooped.

"I'll be taking this failure with me. Young man, if you want this woman, come to the Souja. I'll be waiting!"

A green sphere of light appeared around Kagato, and in an instant, both of them vanished along with the light. Afterward, there was nothing but the gray sky and the snow falling silently, as if nothing had ever happened.

"Brother! Brother Yosho!!"

As if a spell had been broken, Ayeka ran toward him.

"It really is... you, Brother."

Ayeka caught Katsuhito and shook him by the arm.

"Forgive me. It seems my secret is out," Katsuhito said, looking down at Ayeka as she shook him, but he suddenly grimaced. "Ow, ow... don't be so rough on me."

Ayeka stopped abruptly and saw blood seeping through the shoulder of Katsuhito's clothing.

"Brother...!?"

In Ayeka's eyes, the image of her brother in his youth overlapped with Katsuhito.

"What happened to... my beautiful brother? To have changed so much... to look like this..."

Tears overflowed from Ayeka's eyes. Emotions beyond words poured out of her one after another.

"Ayeka." Katsuhito gently pulled her close. "I am sorry. Every time I saw you, it was painful for me as well. But I am one who has already cast aside the Imperial House. I had hoped I could leave things unsaid."

Ayeka looked up sharply. "Why? Why would you do such a thing? You and I were betrothed. Even if it was something our father decided, I have been waiting for you all this time."

Katsuhito looked at Ayeka painfully but directly.

"Ayeka. You were too young then to know. It is true that our father took two wives. Lady Misaki, your mother, who carries the pure blood of the Juraian Royal Family, and my mother, Funaho, who carries the blood of this alien planet. This was done to show the prestige of the Imperial House and to prevent the weakening of our bloodline. However, there are many who despise alien blood..."

Katsuhito gently wiped away Ayeka's tears with his finger.

"The Imperial House was divided into two factions at that time. Had I remained on Jurai, a struggle for succession would have broken out between you and me. Moreover, had we married, it might have escalated into a civil war. I grew weary of such futile conflict. I wanted to test my own strength. I wanted to see how far the Tenchi-Ken—the power of the Imperial House—could take me. It was just then that Ryoko attacked."

Katsuhito fell silent for a moment as if lost in thought.

"If you saw Funaho’s memories, then you already know, but the Ryoko of that time was a puppet being controlled by someone. She had the form of a woman, but she was a monster that couldn't be called human. However, I couldn't bring myself to kill her. I thought that since this monster was born into the world, it must surely have some role to play. Perhaps that was a message from the Tenchi-Ken. I am glad now that I did not kill Ryoko back then."

"That's not true!!" Ayeka grabbed Katsuhito's arm with unexpected intensity. "Because of that woman... Brother... if you had ended her life then, none of this would have happened."

"That is not so, Ayeka!"

Katsuhito quietly removed Ayeka's hands from his arm and held them firmly.

"Among all living things, it is not for a single person to judge who is right and who is wrong. I am glad I came to this planet. Because I came here, I was able to have a grandson like Tenchi. It is a story too painful to tell right now, and even if I did, you likely wouldn't be able to accept it yet."

Katsuhito looked away and bit his lip. Ayeka, with her hands held by her brother, felt as though she had caught a glimpse into the heart of a man she didn't know at all.

"But, Brother..." Ayeka hesitated. "Where is the Tree of Life? Where is the water? Let us return to Jurai together. If things stay like this, your life will come to an end!"

As she spoke, she felt the tears welling up once again.

"Ayeka... Ayeka!"

Katsuhito's chest tightened as he pulled Ayeka into a firm embrace.

"It is enough. It is enough, Ayeka. Someday... even you will understand."

Drenched to the bone, Tenchi stood by and listened to their exchange in silence. Though his body was chilled and shivering, he felt something hot welling up inside him—a strange, trembling sensation that filled his heart.

"Tenchi."

Katsuhito noticed him and looked up.

"Were you listening?"

"Yeah..."

Tenchi stopped beside them and tried to manage a smile.

“You are a prince of the Juraian Royal Family,” Katsuhito said quietly. “Come here. I shall entrust this hand to you.”

Gently pushing Tenchi forward to face Ayeka, Katsuhito took both of their hands and pressed them together.

“I have grown too old to hold this hand as a fiancé. I shall entrust the unseen future to you. Ayeka, say nothing.”

Katsuhito withdrew his hands from theirs and took a step back.

“I have been watching you. I knew. Your heart is with Tenchi. For now, that is as it should be. Do not look back anymore. You should simply be honest with your own heart.”

Tenchi and Ayeka could only gaze at one another, speechless. It felt as though if they spoke, the heat filling their hearts would simply flow away.

...If Ryoko were here, she surely would have made a massive scene.

Even as his hand rested against Ayeka’s, Tenchi couldn't help but remember. Ryoko had shielded him and been taken away by Kagato. A sharp, piercing pain ran through Tenchi’s chest.

“Ayeka-san.”

Tenchi gently pulled his hand away.

“I... I have to save Ryoko.”

Ayeka’s face stiffened in a start.

“No, you mustn't!”

Despite her firm words, she gazed at Tenchi with pleading eyes.

“You must not go. That man is a terrifying criminal. Even with the Master Key, against that power...”

Tenchi bit his lip, her words hitting a sore spot. She was right. Given how the previous battle had gone, it was only natural for Ayeka to feel that way, even if he did have the Master Key.

But he had to go!

Tenchi felt an almost painful conviction surge within him. Ryoko had been willing to throw her life away to protect him. He couldn't just abandon her to choose Ayeka!

As if reading Tenchi's internal conflict, Katsuhito spoke up.

"Tenchi. I shall grant the Master Key to you. Go and defeat Kagato. Within you, there is still a sleeping power. The Master Key shall be the 'key' to drawing it out."

Tenchi whirled around toward Katsuhito in surprise.

"Grant it to me...? But Grandpa, you already gave it to me..."

"You must form a contract."

Katsuhito looked back at Tenchi. His eyes were filled with a powerful light.

"My ship, Funaho. In the name of Tsunami—ancestor of the Imperial House, mother of all, and the Ship of Beginnings—grant me power and enter into a contract with me..."

Reciting the words of the contract he had uttered only once thirty-four years ago, Katsuhito placed his hands on Tenchi's shoulders and turned him toward the Funaho tree.

"Grip the Master Key and recite these words. If your heart is true, the sword will accept you as its rightful master. You will gain power incomparable to anything you have held before. However, if you deceive your heart, you will lose your life."

Tenchi's body trembled involuntarily. Ayeka watched their backs with bated breath.

Oh, it is the ritual of contract, she thought. *The same destiny of the Juraian Royal Family as the contract I made with Ryu-Oh... They say if you deceive your heart, you will lose your life...*

"I'll do it!"

Tenchi whispered the words, then suddenly shook off Katsuhito's hands and ran. The Master Key remained thrust into the trunk of the Funaho, looking as if it had been waiting for him.

"Mother... please lend me your strength!"

Behind his closed eyelids, his mother's image suddenly flickered to life. She wore the beautiful robes of Jurai, smiling amidst a shroud of light.

Tenchi... Mother is right here. Believe in your own heart...

The voice echoed directly into his mind. In that moment, his fear vanished. Tenchi reached for the sword and pulled the blade of light straight out.

"Waaaaah!"

An out-of-place wailing rang out. Mihoshi was leaning against Sasami, sobbing uncontrollably, her face a mess of tears.

"I'm so sorry, Tenchi-san. I was so worried I was holding my breath while watching, and then I just suddenly lost it..."

"There, there, it's okay now."

Sasami had her arms around the First-Class Detective—who was fifteen years her senior—doing her best to comfort her.

"I'm so useless at a time like this... It's my fault Ryoko-san was taken..."

"I told you, it's not your fault, Sis!"

At a loss, Sasami stroked Mihoshi's head the way she would pet Ryo-Ohki.

"She's right. It's not your fault, Mihoshi-san."

Before they knew it, Tenchi was standing beside them, helping comfort Mihoshi.

"I wasn't strong enough. I don't think I'm strong enough now, either, but there's no point in moping about it. I got the Master Key back properly, so don't cry anymore, okay?"

Katsuhito watched Tenchi with a heart full of emotion.

You truly are Achika's child. Achika must have been protecting you. The contract has been sealed. What I did was not a mistake...

Then, suddenly, a dream of Achika surfaced in his mind.

—When that child turns fifteen, please send him to me—

When he turns fifteen... when he turns fifteen...

Those words raced through Katsuhito's mind. Unable to hide his agitation, he abruptly turned away and knelt by the edge of the pond. An ominous premonition crossed his chest, feeling as though it would burst with nowhere to go.

Tenchi... You may not return alive. If that is Achika's wish, I can do nothing but see you off in silence. No matter how painful that may be, it is my retribution. Achika, Tsunami... please return Tenchi safely.

Even knowing it might be futile, Katsuhito couldn't help but offer a prayer. Tenchi had obtained the sword and would soon depart. Every single thing was happening just as it had in the dream. He did not have the power to stop it.

Katsuhito involuntarily clenched his fist. Just then, a slender hand was placed on his shoulder. He turned to find Ayeka gazing at him, her eyes brimming with tears.

Over by the pond, Tenchi, Mihoshi, and Sasami were talking amongst themselves.

"Even if you say you're going, how are you going to get to where he is?"

"Hmm..." Tenchi murmured, looking troubled.

"If only I had my shuttle... I'm sure it's in sub-space, so should we try looking for it?"

Mihoshi flattened a "Bon-Bon" into a cube shape but stopped halfway.

"This has 330,330,000 possible combinations... I wonder how we should search for it?"

"Whaaa?!"

Mihoshi was at her wit's end, Tenchi's shoulders slumped, and Sasami let out a sigh.

"If only Ryu-Oh were safe," Sasami muttered, staring at the water's surface.

Suddenly, a *"Meow-meow"* sounded at their feet.

"Ryo-Ohki?!"

"Myaaaaann!"

Ryo-Ohki's ears perked up as she looked up at Sasami as if pleading. A flash of inspiration hit Sasami.

"She's saying something! There's something over there, let's go!"

With Ryo-Ohki leading the way, Sasami, Tenchi, and Mihoshi ran toward the side of the pond near the Masaki house.

Chapter 14:

Myaaaaaann!

“Myaaaaaann!”

Ryo-Ohki planted her feet by the pond, baring her claws and crying out. A low growl erupted from her throat. Following that growl, the surface of the pond began to ripple and churn into a whirlpool.

“Tenchi-bro, look!” Sasami shouted.

Something massive was attempting to emerge from the water.

“Ryu-Oh!!”

Sasami gasped. The Ryu-Oh unit that had sunk to the bottom of the pond was being lifted by Ryo-Ohki’s psychic power. Ryo-Ohki let out an especially shrill cry and suddenly jumped.

Right before their eyes, Ryo-Ohki’s form began to change. Her limbs stiffened and crystallized. With the crystal at the center—as if tracing Ryo-Ohki’s original shape—four large, distinctive horns grew outward.

“Kyaa! Ryo-Ohki-chan is...!!” Sasami screamed.

Ryo-Ohki continued to grow, revealing her majestic form in the sky above the pond.

“...She transformed?!”

Tenchi, having collapsed in shock, stared up at Ryo-Ohki. Having turned into a massive spaceship, Ryo-Ohki took the Ryu-Oh unit into her lower section and slowly descended.

Ayeka and Katsuhito had arrived at the scene as well, silently looking up at Ryo-Ohki.

“Why the Ryu-Oh...?” Ayeka whispered, her face pale.

“Oh my, that little thing... oh, what should we do!” Mihoshi muttered, still sitting on the ground after losing her footing.

“Myaaaaaann!!”

A triumphant cry echoed across the area. Simultaneously, the bridge—which looked like a crystal sphere in the center—opened up.

“Y-You did it, Ryo-Ohki!”

Tenchi muttered, still stunned. “With this, we might actually be able to get to where he is!”

No one nodded. Even Tenchi was thinking to himself:

Is it really okay to fly in something like this?!

Kagato’s ship, the Soja, sat positioned exactly halfway between the Earth and the Moon, waiting quietly for something. In the Soja’s main room, Kagato sat upon the throne of the Great Cathedral, staring at the screen spread out at his feet.

Trapped within an hourglass floating above the Cathedral, Ryoko suddenly regained consciousness.

“Those fools... they’ve come all together, have they?”

Kagato’s murmur reached Ryoko’s ears. The screen below showed Ryo-Ohki leaving Earth and heading toward the Soja. As a portion of the screen zoomed in, the figures of Tenchi, Ayeka, and Mihoshi on the bridge became clearly visible.

Ryoko’s eyes went wide.

Ryo-Ohki!! So, that kid decided on her own to bring Tenchi along.

She had even been polite enough to incorporate the Ryu-Oh unit. She was likely using it as reinforcement for defense. That was probably why Ayeka was on board. Realizing that Tenchi was coming to save her in Ryo-Ohki, Ryoko almost moved to tears.

However, compared to the massive Soja, Ryo-Ohki looked incredibly light and unreliable. Trapped in the hourglass-shaped seal and unable to move a muscle, anxiety spread through Ryoko's chest.

I know Ryo-Ohki's capabilities better than anyone. Her mobility is certainly superior, but her combat power is no match for the massive Soja. If I were on board, we could use the power of the gems, but as it stands, won't they just end up running for their lives...?

As if reading Ryoko's anxiety, Kagato muttered while staring at the screen.

"Strange... To think they would come to throw their lives away for a failure like you."

Ryoko reflexively snapped back. "I'm not your machine. I've evolved. As a human being..."

"A human?" Kagato interrupted. "Compared to the will of this infinite universe, humans are merely fragile clumps of organic matter... The emotions you've acquired are nothing more than fleeting dust. Don't you agree, Ryoko?"

Kagato finally looked up, staring intently at Ryoko.

"I, too, am a finite life form; that has not changed. However, I have lived long enough to probe the will of the universe. And I thought: the universe is itself a great living entity whose purpose is to exist. Existence itself is the will."

"....."

Ryoko remained silent, unable to gauge Kagato's true intentions, and simply stared back.

"However, there are things not bound by existence as matter. A medium that can draw forth infinite energy... an existence that could be called the universal will itself... Something that has existed since the beginning and will continue to exist beyond the end. Have you not heard that name? Humans call it God, others call it the Ship of Beginnings, and yet they say no one has ever seen its form."

"...Tsunami!!" Ryoko gasped.

So, this man's goal was to draw out Tsunami's power? Was that the reason he had been so persistent in seeking the Master Key?

"Yes, Tsunami."

An expression that could almost be taken for awe appeared on Kagato's face.

"The 'key' is not necessarily limited to the Master Key. It could be the blood of the Juraian Royal Family, or perhaps words. I intend to try every possibility. To see Tsunami with these eyes and feel her with these hands—that is the goal I have staked my life as a scientist upon."

Ryoko had no words. Kagato's speech transcended judgments of good and evil; his very existence felt like a single, driving obsession. It would be easy to say he was insane. But when a man with immense power and intellect speaks such things, what on earth could stop him?

I am powerless.

Ryoko realized this clearly now. If there were a possibility of calling forth Tsunami's power, Kagato wouldn't even hesitate to destroy the universe.

But no matter how powerless I am, I have to fight. And I will protect Tenchi...!

It was just as Ryoko made this resolution.

"Now then, it is time to prepare a welcome for our guests. Ryoko, you may watch comfortably from there."

Ryoko was startled. "Stop it!!"

The words burst from her mouth before she could think. "Don't touch Tenchi! Just leave Tenchi alone...!"

Kagato stood up and looked up at Ryoko.

"Ryoko. If that boy is the person both you and I think he is, then what is there to suffer over? You should just stay there and watch."

Having said that, Kagato didn't give Ryoko another glance as he walked up toward the altar.

"An attack from the Soja is coming! Prepare to evade!"

Standing on Ryo-Ohki's bridge and looking up at the omnidirectional screen, Ayeka issued a sharp command to Mihoshi.

"...Even if you say that, what am I supposed to do?!"

Mihoshi was the one hovering her hands over the spherical control stick, looking flustered. In the center of the screen, the Soja's particle cannon was opening its sinister maw.

For a moment, intense light scattered across the screen, and a "BOOM" shook the entire bridge. Three screams rang out.

Ayeka nevertheless stood her ground bravely. Placing her hands on the controls, she shouted toward the crystal—Ryo-Ohki's computer unit—which was floating in mid-air.

"Ryo-Ohki! Attack! I don't care what it is, just attack quickly!!"

Oh, I just don't understand other people's ships! Ayeka muttered regretfully, biting her lip.

After leaving her brother Yosho and Sasami on Earth, Ayeka had boarded the ship of that hateful woman along with Tenchi to come this far.

Not for Ryoko's sake, but for Tenchi-sama's...

She had told herself she wouldn't say anything resentful.

Tenchi himself didn't understand what was happening and was simply staring at the screen with worry. Ayeka thought it was only natural. It was like being suddenly placed in the cockpit of a state-of-the-art fighter jet. Even though Ryo-Ohki responded to verbal commands, her abilities and functions were full of things even Ayeka didn't understand.

The attacks from the Soja continued relentlessly, like a cat toying with a mouse. Whether Ryo-Ohki was deciding for herself or Ayeka's piloting was working, the ship continued to narrowly dodge the attacks with small, sharp movements.

"Ryo-Ohki, where is the damage?" Ayeka shouted, frustrated by the lack of information.

"Mya-mya-mya-mya-aaaann!" came the reply.

Ayeka slumped, seriously considering if she should just head back to Earth right now.

No, if I show my back, we're finished, Ayeka immediately reconsidered. She looked around the bridge for Mihoshi, who had been tossed somewhere by the previous impact.

Mihoshi was sitting in a corner of the bridge, deep in conversation with a crystal that had gem-like eyes and a nose.

"Hey, you! What are you doing at a time like this?!" Ayeka yelled instinctively.

"Oh, Ayeka-san."

Mihoshi turned around without a care in the world and asked, "This looks like Ryo-Ohki-chan, but I wonder if it really is? I thought it'd be nice if we could communicate, so I've been talking to it for a while, but it only says 'Myan.'"

Ayeka felt a headache coming on.

"Whether that is Ryo-Ohki or not...!"

Between her words, she also had to pilot the ship.

"We won't make it if you keep doing that! Come over here and help!!"

Mihoshi pulled her neck in with a start and attempted to stand up. Just then, another impact rocked the bridge.

"They seem to be struggling," Kagato muttered, looking down at the screen in the Great Cathedral. "I am the one who created that Ryo-Ohki. To be precise, I was still an assistant back then. No matter what evasive maneuvers it takes, I can read them as if they were in the palm of my hand... unfortunately for them."

Kagato ceased his preliminary testing and issued an attack order to the Souja to move into the second phase. Suddenly, Ryo-Ohki's movements shifted. The hull itself began to pulse as if flickering, dodging attacks with an unknown maneuvering capability.

Kagato's eyes widened. "Ho... This movement... is it the power of that boy?"

Ryoko, watching helplessly from within the hourglass, thought the same thing. It was strange. Those movements were almost... She couldn't bring herself to say it looked like it was drunk. Who on earth was piloting like that? Ryoko pictured the members on the bridge. Tenchi, Ayeka, Mihoshi.

Mihoshi!? Was that out-of-control woman doing something? As Ryoko stared at Ryo-Ohki's movements, she started to get a headache herself and decided to simply pray for the safety of Tenchi and the others for the time being.

On Ryo-Ohki's bridge, the situation was beyond anything they could have imagined. The floor itself was undulating, and Tenchi and Ayeka could not even remain standing.

"Ayeka-san, what on earth has happened to this ship?" Tenchi shouted as he tumbled down the slanted floor.

"Perhaps the balancer has gone haywire!" Ayeka replied, sliding down as well.

The two ended up in a heap in the corner of the bridge and looked around for the cause. They saw Mihoshi and a crystal with eyes facing each other, wine glasses in hand. For a moment, the crystal transformed into its beast type—Ryo-Ohki's original form. Ryo-Ohki held a glass, looking completely intoxicated. Since the leader, Ryo-Ohki, was drunk, the crystals acting as sub-units were all simulating that behavior.

Ayeka scrambled to her feet and tackled Mihoshi from behind.

"What do you think you're doing!? This is the computer unit! What are you doing getting the ship's brain drunk!?"

Grabbed by the collar and terrified by Ayeka's fury, Mihoshi began to make desperate excuses.

"Um, well, I wasn't being very helpful just sitting here, so I thought I'd get a drink, but I accidentally brought out some alcohol. Then, little Ryo-Ohki came over..."

Mihoshi held out her cube as if it were a piece of evidence. Ayeka's shoulders slumped in despair.

"No, this might actually be lucky!" Tenchi ran over. "We have to attack while we have this chance! Ayeka-san, can't we launch an attack from the Ryu-Oh side?"

"That is possible, but..." Ayeka turned around, startled.

Tenchi's face was so dignified—like a completely different person—that Ayeka almost forgot her purpose while staring at him.

"If we can do it, let's do it. At this rate, we can't even get close. We have to find a way to board the Souja."

He cares for Ryoko that much... For a moment, Ayeka considered telling a lie out of spite. If she said she couldn't do it, Tenchi would likely give up. But what then? The Souja might destroy this ship. It seemed this ship could not attack without the power of Ryoko's gems. As they were, they had no choice but to wait to be captured. Conflict was plain on Ayeka's face.

"The Ryu-Oh is currently being used to reinforce Ryo-Ohki," Ayeka began to speak slowly. "I do not know if we can draw out its true power, but first, we must open the Lighthawk Wings."

Tenchi nodded, watching Ayeka intently.

"...For defense alone, the Ryu-Oh can use three Lighthawk Wings, which is sufficient. However, to use them for an attack, we must deploy the wings once more."

She became increasingly uneasy as she spoke.

"We deploy the Lighthawk Wings, cause the energy to flow backward into a single central point, and fire it. At that moment... if the attack energy is one hundred, the defense becomes zero."

Tenchi listened in silence, then stood up straight. "I understand. I'll try it!"

"Tenchi-sama!?" Ayeka cried out instinctively.

"Ryo-Ohki! Send me to the Ryu-Oh!"

"Myaaaa-nn!" Ryo-Ohki let out a cry in acknowledgment.

"Once I'm over there, please give me instructions."

With those words, Tenchi vanished.

Having materialized on the bridge of the Ryu-Oh, Tenchi looked around in confusion.

"I talked a big game, but what am I supposed to do?"

Tenchi gripped the Tenchi Sword and looked over the unfamiliar communication devices and consoles. None of them felt like machinery; they felt more like ornaments.

"Tenchi-sama!"

A screen opened with the sound of a voice, and Ayeka's face appeared.

"You do not need to touch anything."

Tenchi felt relieved by her first words, which seemed to read his inner anxiety. "Where is the control stick?"

"I should have been the one to go..." Ayeka furrowed her brows as if angry.

"But Ayeka-san, you're the only one who can pilot Ryo-Ohki. I'm not useful over there, so this is for the best."

As Tenchi spoke, he thought to himself that he probably wasn't going to be much more useful over here either. However, since he had inherited the Tenchi Sword from his grandfather and flown into space, he had to do whatever he could. Tenchi intended to carve a path and infiltrate the Souja no matter what. That was the only plan he really had.

"There is no such thing as a control stick," Ayeka continued. "Please place the Tenchi Sword on the console in front of you. By doing so, the Ryu-Oh will accept the Tenchi Sword as the master key."

As instructed, Tenchi placed the Tenchi Sword onto the console engraved with Jurai characters. The sword was fixed into the center of the console with its gem facing upward, and it began to emit light.

"The Tenchi Sword has started glowing..."

"That is as it should be. Now, please focus your thoughts. The sword will sense your will as the key and make its judgment."

"Then..."

"Focus on the thought: 'Lighthawk Wings, open!'"

Just as Ayeka said, Tenchi concentrated his will. A monitor screen appeared below the main screen, showing the Ryu-Oh's movements. Three massive Lighthawk Wings appeared in front of Ryo-Ohki.

"I did it!" Tenchi cheered involuntarily, and Ayeka smiled on the screen.

"Ho... The power of the Juraian Royal Family, the Lighthawk Wings."

Kagato spoke up, staring at the screen at his feet. "In that case, I must respond in earnest."

On the screen, Ryo-Ohki was effortlessly intercepting the Souja's attacks with the three Lighthawk Wings. A smile played on Kagato's lips. It had been worth the wait. Indeed, the Tenchi Sword was beginning to show its power. Was it Princess Ayeka or that boy who was wielding the sword? It didn't matter; he would know soon enough, Kagato thought. The one who survived the next attack would be the true king.

Kagato quietly raised his hand and called the name of the Souja.

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the attacks from the Souja ceased. A pale blue aura of energy wavered around the massive hull. Ayeka watched the Souja, unable to look away, feeling a chill.

"It's coming...!"

It wasn't a standard particle cannon. It was drawing in some kind of massive energy. Ayeka screamed instinctively.

"Tenchi-sama! Pull back the Lighthawk Wings! A terrifying attack is coming!!"

On the Ryu-Oh's bridge, Tenchi heard that cry. "What, right now...!?"

On the sub-screen, the Lighthawk Wings were in the process of full deployment.

"Why...?"

Regardless of Tenchi's confusion, the Lighthawk Wings finished their full deployment. The energy began to flow backward toward the center. Soon, a small black hole appeared in the center, and within it, a point of light emerged. Tenchi steeled his resolve.

"Go————!!"

The point of light expanded rapidly and shot out as an arrow of energy. Simultaneously, a pale blue arrow of light was fired from the Souja. The two lights collided at the midpoint,

and a tremendous explosion occurred. The bridges of both Ryo-Ohki and the Ryu-Oh were hit by a powerful glare, and everyone watched the outcome as if frozen.

Then, the Souja's light pierced through the Ryu-Oh's light. The light traveled at a terrifying speed, skewering the Ryu-Oh and flying off into the void. An instant later, an explosion occurred at the lower section of Ryo-Ohki. The bridge of Ryo-Ohki was buffeted by the blast, looking as though it might be torn apart.

Silence returned. The Ryu-Oh unit was nowhere to be seen. Ayeka, as if released from a spell, switched through screens one after another, searching for Tenchi.

"Tenchi-sama, Tenchi-sama, Tenchi-sama, Tenchi-sama!!"

There was nothing. Nothing but fragments of the Ryu-Oh bridge and torn pieces of the Ryu-Oh's wood and branches filling the screens. There was no sign of Ayeka's guardians, Azaka and Kamidake, who were supposed to be on the bridge. Ayeka continued to switch screens while calling Tenchi's name, but she suddenly staggered back.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!!"

A scream like she was coughing up blood erupted from her throat.

Time stopped for Ryoko as she watched the same scene.

"Ten... chi..."

It's a lie! Tenchi... there was no way Tenchi could die. Surely, the Ryu-Oh was protected by the Lighthawk Wings... When the light of the explosion faded, Ryoko saw the same sight Ayeka had seen. Ryo-Ohki drifted slowly through a sea of Ryu-Oh fragments.

"Hmph..." Kagato looked down at the screen at his feet.

Only Ayeka and Mihoshi remained on Ryo-Ohki's bridge. The boy had died. That boy, who had aimed to be the successor of Yosho and the wielder of the Tenchi Sword!

"UAAAAAAAAAAH!"

A beast-like cry echoed inside the hourglass, and the sand that had buried Ryoko flowed backward. The moment the seal broke and the glass shattered into a thousand pieces, Ryoko vanished from the Souja's bridge.

Kagato paid no mind to Ryoko. An uncontrollable disappointment appeared on his face. The Tenchi Sword had not been the key to calling Tsunami after all. Now, there was no reaction indicating the existence of the Tenchi Sword anywhere in this universe. Had he returned to square one again...?

A low laugh escaped Kagato’s throat. It was a bitter laugh. While offering a silent prayer in the corner of his mind for the boy who had died like an insect, Kagato continued to laugh.

Chapter 15:

Tenchi!

"Tenchi! Tenchi————!!"

Flying desperately through the wreckage of the Ryu-Oh, the liberated Ryoko continued her search for Tenchi. She knew it was futile. But she couldn't help but look. If Tenchi's arm... no, if even a part of his shattered body was found... Ryoko tried desperately to shake off the ominous imagination, tormented by a fear that made the core of her head feel numb.

I... I'm going to go crazy!

But contrary to those thoughts, Ryoko flew obsessively among the debris, determined not to miss a thing. Something red crossed the edge of her vision. Ryoko felt a shock that took her breath away and turned around.

It was the headband... The headband Tenchi had tied around his forehead... It drifted among the wreckage, frozen and stained with blood. Ryoko's hands trembled.

"Tenchi...!!"

Ryoko pulled the headband to her chest, her shoulders shaking. Her tears fell into the void and froze. After a moment that felt like eternity passed, Ryoko slowly stood up.

"Kagato..." Her lips moved slightly. "You took the most important thing from me... You will pay for this."

Words were stolen by the emotions welling up inside her, and her clenched fists shook. "...I'll make you pay!!"

Ryoko screamed and vanished from the spot as a streak of light.

On Ryo-Ohki's bridge, Ayeka sat slumped, looking dazed. Mihoshi was also merely staring blankly at the screen.

"Tenchi-sama..."

Ayeka heard her own whispered words as if they belonged to someone else. No tears came. Ayeka's heart had become empty; the wreckage of the Ryu-Oh on the screen, the distant Souja—everything continued to drift, having lost all meaning.

"Ayeka-san," Mihoshi called out, as if suddenly snapping back to her senses. "Something is coming."

Ayeka looked at the screen reflexively, but she could see nothing.

"It's moving toward us at high speed... Ah!" Mihoshi gave a small cry. "It disappeared."

Disappeared?

Ayeka tried to contemplate the meaning of those words, but she quickly gave up. The thought that she should have died along with him at that moment occupied her entire mind, crushing all other reflections.

Suddenly, a figure appeared on the bridge. Ayeka instinctively turned her gaze toward it and gasped.

"Ryoko...!?"

Mihoshi let out a soft wheeze. "Miss Ryoko...!? I thought you were captured by Kagato..."

Ryoko did not give them so much as a glance. Her lips remained tightly set as she stared at the omni-directional screen. Her face was deathly pale, and only her eyes glowed with an eerie golden light.

"Ryo-Ohki!"

Standing in the center of the bridge, Ryoko raised one hand and took control of the crystals—the computer units—that had been scattered haphazardly. One after another, the crystals stood upright and arranged themselves in a sharp, radial circular pattern. Eventually, their movement came to a sudden halt. A silence filled the bridge, as if the room itself were awaiting Ryoko’s command.

Ryoko raised her hand once more. Suddenly, Ayeka lunged in front of her.

"What... what are you doing here now!? Why didn't you escape sooner! For the sake of saving someone like you, Tenchi-sama..."

The words failed her. Ayeka grabbed Ryoko’s shoulders and shook her.

"Tenchi-sama is... Tenchi-sama is..."

Tears overflowed from Ayeka’s eyes, and Ryoko’s face became a blur. She simply could not force the next words out. It was as if Ayeka’s heart and her entire body were resisting the sentence.

"Tenchi-sama is..."

Finally, Ayeka cast her eyes down. The desire to tear Ryoko apart right then and there and the realization that doing so would not bring Tenchi back lost their way within her, swirling in a violent, raging storm.

Mihoshi, still pale and unable to even find her voice, stared at the two of them. In truth, she wanted to wail at the top of her lungs. Like Ayeka, she wanted to grab Ryoko and shake her. However, Mihoshi’s instincts, honed as a Galaxy Policewoman, would not permit it. It wasn't over yet. This was merely the beginning. Furthermore, she had a duty to pursue this to the end. Mihoshi chewed on the word "duty" with a feeling like swallowing sand.

Suddenly, Ryoko reached out and casually removed Ayeka’s hands, pushing her away.

"I’m diving into the Soja."

Her voice was hard and dry. Ayeka reflexively looked up. At that moment, something was suddenly tossed toward Ayeka’s face.

"This is..."

She didn't need to ask. It was the hand-towel that Tenchi had worn around his forehead. Blood, melted by the room’s temperature, stained Ayeka’s fingers and began to seep out. Her vision went dark.

"Miss Ayeka!?"

Mihoshi’s slender arms caught Ayeka, and she snapped back to her senses. She saw Ryoko tilt her head and remove the earring from her left ear. With an expressionless face, Ryoko fitted the earring—a replica of the gem—onto her right wrist. The

diamond-patterned protector that had appeared only on the left side of her body now manifested on her right, covering her from shoulder to waist.

"It isn't over yet. Not until I take that guy... until I take Kagato down!!"

Ryoko’s lips trembled, and her golden eyes blazed. The crystals resonated with a sharp, high-pitched metallic ring.

"Let’s go!!"

Ryo-Ohki banked slowly, weaving through the sea of void where the wreckage of the Ryu-Oh drifted. A moment later, she accelerated toward the Soja. Only three seconds passed before Ryo-Ohki, transformed into a single arrow of light, pierced through the Soja’s shields and vanished within.

"Big brother!... Tenchi-niichan!"

Sasami continued to run through the woods, weeping. Just a moment ago, from the grounds of the Masaki Shrine, she had seen a terrifying light streak across the dark sky. In that instant, a single scene had been etched clearly into Sasami’s mind: the image of Tenchi on the bridge of the Ryu-Oh, and then, a second later, Tenchi vanishing as he was engulfed in a brilliant white light...

"Sasami..."

The voice of Katsuhito—no, Yosho—reached her. Katsuhito’s face was ashen. He looked so haggard that it was hard to believe he was the same man who had fought Kagato on equal terms and driven him back.

"You must not stay here. Now that I have let go of the Tenchi-ken, I cannot protect you. Go to Funaho. Quickly!"

"Grandfather... Yosho-niisama!?"

"Go!"

Katsuhito pushed Sasami away as if shoving her off and disappeared quickly into the main temple building. Sasami began to run.

The dark, looming form of Funaho towered before her.

"Funaho, answer me..."

Sasami wiped away her tears and placed her hand on Funaho's trunk. "I want to go to where Tenchi-niichan is. Where is he?"

Then, a faint, white silhouette of a person appeared before Funaho. It was a woman she did not recognize, dressed in the beautiful attire of Jurai. Sasami noticed that the woman's features somewhat resembled Tenchi's.

"Who are you!?"

Strangely, she felt no fear.

"I am Achika... Tenchi's mother."

The woman's cool, clear eyes crinkled into a smile. "Come this way... I shall take you there."

The woman who called herself Achika held out a slender hand. "There is nothing to be afraid of. Come..."

Sasami took the hand, feeling a strange sensation as if she were in the middle of a dream she had once seen. Immediately, her surroundings blurred, and she felt her consciousness fading away.

"...By the sign of the King and my True Name, I open the path to the progenitor of the Cosmic Tree. Let the Heavens be to the Sea, the Sea to the Earth, and the Earth to the Heavens; show the path carved in light..."

Ah, it's Tsunami's song...

Hearing that clear, resonant chanting, Sasami's consciousness was swallowed into a soft light.

Ayeka and Ryoko stood in the hall leading to the Great Cathedral. A wall towered high before them. To reach this point, they had fought countless guardians within the corridors. Ayeka was now in her battle dress, and a protective pattern like war paint had appeared on her face. At some point, they had lost Mihoshi; she was nowhere to be seen.

"Kagato is beyond this... What do you intend to do?" Ayeka asked while looking up at the towering wall.

"Hmph... It’s just a deception anyway."

Ryoko casually slammed her fist into the wall. Without a sound, the wall crumbled, revealing a pocket dimension filled with an opaque gray mist. Within it stood a black door. It felt devoid of mass, with no seams and no handle.

"How are we supposed to get in—"

"Wait!" Ryoko cut her off.

A crack ran down the center of the door, and a dazzling light leaked out. The light expanded rapidly until it took the shape of the doorway. Ryoko smirked.

"It’s a formal invitation. Let’s go!"

The two figures vanished into the light.

"Miss Ryoko, Miss Ayeka..."

Mihoshi ran through the corridor with a face on the verge of tears. She had no idea where she had been running for a while now, or even where "here" was in the first place.

"Let’s see... I was with them until Miss Ryoko said the Great Cathedral was just ahead..."

Mihoshi was entirely unaware that a cube she had accidentally dropped had served as a key, triggering a phase shift that sent her into the "reverse world." A door appeared before Mihoshi, identical to the one Ryoko and Ayeka had seen.

"This must be it..."

Believing that the Great Cathedral she sought lay beyond, Mihoshi stepped through. On the other side was a large hall. On a raised area resembling an altar, a young girl stood as still as a statue.

"Who is that!?"

Mihoshi’s foot stepped on a line on the floor inscribed with strange characters. Immediately, the statues of two giant serpents standing on either side of the floor regained life and began to move.

"Eeeeeek!"

Mihoshi’s scream echoed through the plaza. "Please, don't come over here!"

Mihoshi fired her freeze beam wildly at the attacking serpents. She didn't notice the sound of something cracking behind her. On the girl’s chest, a pendant shaped like two snakes shattered.

"Obstruction of justice is a serious crime! Please, stop it!"

Mihoshi was still firing her freeze beam and failed to notice that the girl, now released from her seal, had walked right past her. The girl snapped her fingers. The giant serpents, half-frozen by Mihoshi’s beam, shattered into pieces. Dumbfounded, Mihoshi looked down at the mysterious girl.

"It’s alright now. Also, thank you for rescuing me."

The girl, who looked to be only thirteen or fourteen, gave a brisk thanks and faced Mihoshi with a dignified air.

"...Who are you?" Mihoshi asked timidly.

She didn't recall anything in Washu's—no, Yukinojo's—data about such a young girl being held captive in the Soja.

"By the way, what’s the matter with you? Wandering into a place like this."

While looking at the old-fashioned uniform the girl was wearing, Mihoshi realized she was failing to remember something.

"Um, that outfit... it looks like a very old Science Academy uniform..."

Mihoshi started blabbing whatever came to mind, and at that moment, a specific piece of data clicked.

"The schoolgirl kidnapped by Kagato! Are you perhaps, um, um..."

"I’m Washu," the girl answered matter-of-factly. "Washu, the greatest genius scientist in the universe. I got sealed away in this reverse world over a little trifle."

"Reverse world??"

"Or rather, my own laboratory. Sounds stupid, right? Actually, it is a stupid story."

"???"

Even Mihoshi couldn't keep up; she simply blinked.

"To be sealed away by my own apprentice. And just so he could test the perfection of the system I created."

Washu frowned and clasped her hands behind her back, continuing to speak as if Mihoshi were a student. "That apprentice... he’s talented, sure. But I can't quite forgive the fact that he wants to be number one in this universe."

Mihoshi’s head was starting to ache, but she couldn't help asking. "Um, who is this 'apprentice' you've been talking about?"

"You don't know?" Washu turned around, looking surprised. "It’s Kagato! Kagato!"

"Eh..."

Then this person is... the teacher of the permanently wanted criminal Kagato!?

Mihoshi’s eyes went hollow.

"Hey, don't go passing out on me here," Washu said, hurriedly flying over.

The moment they stepped into the Great Cathedral, solemn music resonated throughout the space. Ayeka and Ryoko instinctively tensed and took a combat stance. A single man sat before a pipe organ set high on a platform, weaving together complex harmonies.

"Kagato!!" Ayeka cried out.

Kagato continued to play without turning around. Ryoko sent an irritated glance toward Ayeka. Biting her lip, Ayeka began to walk toward the throne on the altar.

"Welcome to my cathedral, ladies."

Having finally finished his performance, Kagato stood up gracefully and bowed. "The piece just now was a requiem dedicated to that boy. Did you find it to your liking?"

"Guh..."

A fire blazed in Ryoko's eyes. Just as she clenched her fist, Ayeka lunged forward a fraction of a second faster.

"How dare you... Tenchi-sama..."

Ayeka's entire body was enveloped in an aura. "Ha!"

Along with her shout, a shockwave punch was driven into Kagato's body.

"As expected, you are quite impressive, Princess," Kagato continued, laughing nonchalantly. "If this cathedral were not projecting an energy-neutralization field, that strike would have likely blown me away."

Ayeka pulled back in shock. Then, a shockwave of equal power returned from Kagato's hand.

"Aah!"

Ayeka's body was blown back and slammed onto the floor.

"Prepare yourself!"

Along with the shout, a blade flashed and pierced Kagato's throat. It was Ryoko.

"Guh-ha!"

Kagato's form vanished like smoke.

"Did I get him!?"

Suddenly, a hand wearing a white glove appeared and gripped Ryoko's neck firmly.

"You can't even tell the difference between reality and a shadow. It seems you've grown dull."

The rest of his body appeared, starting from the hand.

"Kagato!!"

"You are in the way. Be a good girl and stay quiet for a while."

Ryoko’s wrist froze, and the ice began to spread across her entire body in an instant.

"This is... the Petrifaction Barrier!"

"Indeed... You should have known me well, Ryoko."

Nothing could reach Ryoko’s ears anymore. After casually casting aside Ryoko’s petrified body, Kagato approached the unconscious Ayeka.

"I have been a bit rough, haven't I?"

When Kagato held out his hand, Ayeka’s body floated up. "Princess Ayeka... You are the only one left who might tell me the secrets of Tsunami. It was you who forced me to do this."

Kagato removed his glove and pressed his hand against Ayeka’s forehead. As his hand became transparent, his fingertips began to sink into her brow.

"Let us see. The mysteries of the Juraian Royal Family."

Ayeka’s body gave a great convulsive leap, even while she remained unconscious.

In the reverse world... within Washu’s laboratory, Washu and Mihoshi were sitting on the floor in the middle of a lecture. Writing complex equations and geometric figures all over the floor, Washu was passionately trying to make Mihoshi understand the dual structure of the Soja.

"So, you see, this goes like this, and that goes like that, and that’s how the structural problems are bypassed. So, topologically speaking, it looks like this. Understand?"

"Yes..." Mihoshi nodded like a suspect who believed the pain would only end if she agreed.

"So, can we not go over to the other side from here?"

Washu collapsed face-down on the floor. "That’s what I’ve been explaining this whole ti—me!!"

Mihoshi trembled at Washu’s outburst and thought to herself that this situation felt familiar. Yes, it was just like when she was talking to the crystal units on Ryo-Ohki’s bridge...

Mihoshi suddenly had an idea. "By the way, isn't there something like a monitor screen here? If we can't go there, at least we could see what’s happening..."

"There is," Washu answered before Mihoshi could even finish. "If you wanted to see, you should have said so sooner."

A screen appeared in the air instantly. It vividly showed Ayeka being blown back by Kagato’s shield and losing consciousness, and Ryoko being petrified by Kagato’s hand.

"That brat... doing that to my precious creation..."

Mihoshi thought she heard Washu mutter angrily, and in the next moment, the petrified Ryoko was pulled from the floor like a magic trick.

"What a hopeless child."

Washu snapped her fingers, and Ryoko’s petrification was instantly undone. The Ryoko on the screen was still lying there. Mihoshi looked back and forth between the Ryoko on the screen and the Ryoko in front of her, who was looking over her own body in surprise.

"Miss Washu... which one is the real one?"

Washu burst out laughing. "The one over there is the real one, in terms of the body." Washu continued while inspecting Ryoko’s form. "This one is the astral body. Ryoko’s spirit. Geist. Well, the explanation doesn't really matter."

Washu brought her face close to Ryoko’s midsection. "Don't you think her lines have collapsed? She must have been living a very undisciplined life. Her overall form is sagging. She needs to spend more disciplined, intellectual days..."

Suddenly, a hand shot out, and Washu was lifted up by Ryoko. "I’ve been listening to you... 'sagging' this, 'no intelligence' that... mind your own business!"

"Oh, Miss Ryoko!"

Seeing Ryoko had regained her spirit, Mihoshi clapped her hands.

"What a way to talk to your mother!" Washu glared at Ryoko with dignity, and Ryoko reflexively let go.

"This is your spirit, so a sagging spirit shows up exactly in your form! Honestly, as a mother, I'm ashamed. It's fine to fall in love with a man, but you need more, you know, self-control..."

"Mother!?" Ryoko snapped. "Mother? What on earth are you talking about? I was made by Kagato..."

"Idiot. You were mind-controlled. I am the one who made you. I made the Soja, I made Ryo-Ohki... I made everything. Especially you, since I used my own ovum—so rather than a creator, I'm your mother, right? Kagato... that fool was just afraid you'd come to break my seal. Honestly, he seems to have done whatever he pleased while I was asleep. And you grew up however you wanted, falling for men however you liked..."

Ryoko listened to this long speech in amazement, but then she suddenly grabbed Washu's collar and yelled back. "What do you mean 'men'!? What men..."

"I mean Lord Tenchi!" Washu slapped Ryoko's hand away sharply, straightened her collar, and pointed a finger at her.

"Wh—" Ryoko staggered. "How do you know that!?"

"You are connected to Ryo-Ohki through an astral link, right? You and I are connected the same way. That is why I know. I know what you saw and what you thought to get this far."

There was an undeniable majesty in Washu's sharp expression, and Ryoko was forced to remain silent.

"I..."

Washu turned her face away. "Do as you like. You can return to the other side now. You can defeat Kagato, or you can fly off somewhere you like..."

"What!?" Ryoko thrust her sword at Washu's throat. Her eyes burned with rage. "You think I'd run... that I'd run away..."

"I didn't say that!" Washu turned back to Ryoko and spoke calmly. "You think Lord Tenchi is dead. I do not. That is the only difference."

"Ugh..." Ryoko backed away, unable to find a retort. A violent shock was written on her face.

"Miss Ryoko. I’m sorry for interrupting," Mihoshi said timidly. "But you’re pointing your sword at the wrong person. We can't get out of here, and you’re the only one who can defeat Kagato..."

"...Hmph!"

Before Mihoshi could finish her sentence, Ryoko vanished.

"She’s gone." Washu let out a sigh and smiled.

"Miss Washu, why did you say those things?"

Chapter 16:

In the Void...

"Are you talking about Lord Tenchi?"

Washu turned around briskly.

"Has anyone actually seen Tenchi's corpse? What about the Tenchi Sword? Or the Guardians who were on the *Ryu-Oh's* bridge? I only know the information I pulled from Ryoko, but I find it hard to believe that something Kagato sought so obsessively would just vanish so easily. I don't have the same emotional attachment to him that Ryoko does, mind you; I'm simply refusing to reach a conclusion until I see it with my own eyes. That's all."

"Washu-san..."

Mihoshi felt a strange sensation.

She couldn't figure out what this woman was thinking—one moment she was cold and dismissive, the next she was fooling around like a child or treating Kagato like a mere student.

If she says things like that, Ryoko-san will only get shaken up and filled with doubt...

"Are you thinking about what I said to Ryoko?" Washu asked sharply.

"I only told her the truth. However, I think that girl might have just tucked away that stupid idea of hers to go on a suicide mission against Kagato."

Washu let out a brief laugh.

Mihoshi felt a sense of dread at the insight hidden within Washu. She hadn't truly believed Washu's claim of being Ryoko's mother before.

But now, she felt as if she could believe it.

"You're right..." Mihoshi murmured. "I can't bring myself to believe Tenchi-san is dead either... He’s a Prince of the Juraian Royal Family, after all. He’ll surely come back... just like he always does..."

Tears welled up in Mihoshi's eyes.

Thinking of the feelings of Ryoko and Ayeka, she had felt she couldn't allow herself to cry, but now those tears overflowed as if a dam had burst, wetting her cheeks.

"There, there."

Washu stepped closer and gently stroked Mihoshi's back.

"That's right. You're exactly right."

Mihoshi nodded again and again. While nodding, she clung to the petite Washu—who didn't even reach her shoulder—and wept until her heart felt empty.

A mysterious light drifted within the void.

It was a small light, shaped like a cocoon.

That cocoon enveloped a single boy.

Looking closely, what appeared to be a cocoon was actually a barrier of light protected between two Guardians, Azaka and Kamidake.

Inside the barrier, Tenchi slept as if cradled by the branches of the *Ryu-Oh*.

His face was deathly pale; his right arm and lower body were missing.

There were no traces of agony on his features, but his chest did not move.

The Guardians had likely frozen everything at the moment they cast the barrier.

The Tenchi Sword floated as if frozen in time directly above his chest.

Suddenly, the Tenchi Sword began to pulse with light.

It appeared to be beating in place of Tenchi’s unmoving heart.

The light grew stronger little by little, and as if in response, the void began to flicker and warp.

Eventually, a point of light appeared near the barrier.

The light grew before one's eyes, swelling into the shape of a bud before splitting into ten petals and unfolding.

They were the Light Hawk Wings.

The center of the light transformed into a ship with ten wings, and from within it, a woman appeared.

Clad in Jurai garments—a brilliant, pure white outfit that looked as if it were woven from light—stood the spirit of the First Ship, Tsunami.

Tsunami landed lightly upon the Guardians and leaned down to check on Tenchi’s condition.

Her face clouded over slightly.

Tsunami moved to the front of Tenchi and reached her hand toward his forehead.

Her glowing white hand passed through the barrier and released the seal the Guardians had placed.

As if frozen time had suddenly shattered, Tenchi’s lips parted, and he took a faint breath.

His chest began to rise and fall slowly.

Tsunami drew closer, cradling Tenchi’s cheeks between both hands as she began to pour energy into him.

The crest on Tsunami’s forehead shone, emitting a powerful flash of light for an instant.

A slight hint of color returned to Tenchi’s cheeks.

Tsunami smiled, quietly closed her eyes, and vanished as she seemed to merge directly into Tenchi’s body.

Following her, the Light Hawk Wings wrapped around him, completing the cocoon of light.

Tenchi was dreaming.

It was a dream of falling endlessly through the void.

He couldn't find his voice to scream, and his arms wouldn't move to grab onto anything.

I... I'm dead...

Despair froze his heart, and darkness covered his eyes.

Ryoko... Ayeka-san...

Tenchi called out the names of those two, who seemed to have gone so far away, with a feeling like he was coughing up blood.

I'm sorry... I couldn't save anyone.

Receiving the Tenchi Sword was a waste, too.

I'm sorry, Grandpa... Sasami-chan. Mihoshi-san...

"It was not a waste!!"

A clear, cool voice echoed.

A tiny light appeared within the darkness.

The light expanded rapidly, eventually revealing the figure of a woman within it.

"Tenchi...!"

Tenchi heard the voice calling his name, saw the arms reached out wide toward him, and looked upon a nostalgic face he had never forgotten for a single moment.

"Mom!!"

In that instant, Tenchi was held tight in the embrace of his mother, Achika.

"...You were alive?"

"No. I have come to see you now by borrowing Tsunami’s form."

Achika quietly pulled away and took Tenchi’s cheeks between her hands.

"I have always been watching you. Through Tsunami, I have been by your side."

Achika smiled.

"I have brought a gift for you. So that you may walk within the light once more..."

Achika gently kissed Tenchi’s forehead.

Suddenly, a crest of light appeared clearly upon Tenchi’s brow.

"This is the power that was meant to become yours. As long as you believe in yourself and keep your heart open, this power will help you. Even if doubt appears, you must not be afraid. If your heart is not closed off, the power will guide you. Until the day this power truly becomes your own, do not forget your mother's words..."

Achika’s form wavered and began to shine even more brightly.

"Mom?"

Achika’s smile enveloped Tenchi like an aura.

"Mom!!"

Particles of light scattered as if they were bursting.

"Achika is... with... in... you..."

A distant voice reached Tenchi’s ears.

When he snapped back to his senses, his mother's figure had vanished, and Tenchi stood in a mysterious space that resembled the bridge of the *Ryu-Oh*.

"Huh... What happened to me?"

Tenchi’s body was still enveloped in light, but his arms and legs were fully intact, and he was gripping the Tenchi Sword in his hand.

"You are safe now."

A cheerful voice spoke.

A massive tree stood before Tenchi, and at the base of that tree stood a woman of Jurai—unfamiliar, yet beautiful.

"You're... Tsunami, right?"

"Yes."

Tsunami smiled.

"You saw a dream, didn't you? I am Tsunami, the spirit of the First Ship. And this is the inside of Tsunami."

Tenchi stared at Tsunami with the feeling that he was still watching a continuation of his dream.

Achika... Mom is inside this person...?

That's right... what happened to Ayeka-san and Ryo-Ohki?

As if she had read Tenchi's mind, Tsunami answered.

"There is a reaction from the Master Key of the *Ryu-Oh* seventy light-seconds from here. Yes... from within this."

Darkness spread at Tsunami’s feet, and the image of the Twin Snakes appeared.

"Inside there?"

"I can hear the cries of hearts. Voices colored by despair and sadness... yes, two of them..."

Tenchi jerked his head up.

"I have to go! Tsunami... take me there. Please!"

"I cannot leave this place. There is another... another person I must protect."

Tsunami quietly looked up.

"You must go there alone. Is that acceptable?"

Tenchi nodded.

Tsunami smiled brightly and touched her finger to Tenchi’s crest.

"The Tenchi Sword is merely a step to draw out your power. Believe in your own strength. You are... the one who is meant to become the Prince of Light..."

As Tenchi’s consciousness faded, the voice grew distant.

"Ayeka... Ayeka..."

At the sound of that voice, Ayeka suddenly woke up.

"Brother?"

The nostalgic figure of her brother was before her eyes.

He looked just as he had in the past—young and beautiful.

For some reason, Ayeka smiled with joy at the sight of her brother, without feeling a single shred of suspicion.

"Ayeka... Tell me. Tell me of the greatest power in the universe, said to be drawn out by the Master Key... the power of Tsunami, the progenitor of the Imperial House and the King of the Cosmic Trees who governs all the Earth."

"Tsunami..."

Ayeka murmured reflexively.

It was strange—something was wrong. A part of Ayeka's reason screamed a warning in a corner of her mind, but her heart repeated her brother’s question as if paralyzed.

"Answer me. Why is it that only those of your clan can use it? Is it your blood that allows it?"

Yosho’s hands moved to Ayeka’s shoulders.

Startled, Ayeka looked down at her own body.

She was completely naked.

"Eek!"

Ayeka let out a small cry and cowered.

“No... You... You aren't my brother!”

Suddenly, Yosho’s fingers dug into Ayeka’s shoulder.

“Answer me. If you refuse, I will squeeze every last drop of your blood out of you to find the clue!”

Yosho’s expression cast an eerie shadow, and she could see his arm beginning to unravel into a spiral from the point where his fingers dug in.

“No...! Tsunami, help me! Tenchi-sama!!”

With a scream, light burst from Ayeka’s body.

Coming to her senses with a start, Ayeka saw the figure of Kagato stepping back as if shocked. Ayeka collapsed onto the floor right then and there, losing consciousness once again.

“Is Tsunami’s power protecting her?”

Kagato looked down at the fallen Ayeka and reached out his hand once more. Suddenly, a pale blue sword pierced through his wrist.

“Still feel like going at it?”

“Ryoko, is it?”

Kagato gave a sidelong glance, then clenched his fist and crushed the sword.

“From the look of things, it seems you’ve already had your reunion. Well? What are your impressions of meeting your mother? Though, she has no power now.”

“I wonder about that.”

Ryoko answered coldly and leveled her Aura Blade.

“Interesting. I happen to have business with you as well.”

Kagato turned around slowly. Distracted by Ryoko's appearance, Kagato failed to notice Ayeka's form vanishing as if sinking into the floor.

A fierce battle began.

"...Sheesh, what is she even doing?"

Washu muttered, watching the screen with her arms crossed in the laboratory of the Sub-Universe. Mihoshi watched with bated breath as Ryoko exchanged blows with Kagato, but finally, she turned back toward Washu.

"Um, Ryoko-san looks like she's being pushed back..."

"She hasn't noticed, by the look of it. Even though I brought Princess Ayeka over here just so it'd be easier for that girl to fight."

Washu pulled Ayeka up from the floor just as she had done with Ryoko earlier and tossed her over to Mihoshi.

"Is... Is this the real one?"

Mihoshi asked as she hurriedly caught the unconscious Ayeka.

"She's the real deal. After all, there's no need for her to go back over there."

Washu returned her attention to the screen and furrowed her brow. Ryoko had just severed a massive pillar with her sword and flown upward. The pillar began to fall toward Kagato. In an instant, Kagato's form vanished. Then, a white hand grabbed Ryoko's ankle as she landed on top of the fallen pillar. Immediately, Kagato's entire body appeared, and while still gripping Ryoko, he slammed her into the pillar.

"Ryoko-san!!"

Mihoshi let out a scream-like cry. Ryoko's form vanished as if sinking into the pillar. Kagato created a Great Sword and thrust it into the pillar, but upon realizing he was too late, he sheathed the blade.

A giant hand grabbed his body. The pillar of compressed tektite transformed into the form of a giant Ryoko before their eyes. Kagato's body was lifted up, held in Ryoko's grasp.

“Wh-What is...?”

Mihoshi spoke up in surprise at the sight.

“It’s just a little game.”

Washu’s response left no room for further questions. Suddenly, Ryoko’s hand, which had been trying to crush Kagato’s body, shattered to pieces. Kagato floated up lightly and unleashed a shockwave. The giant Ryoko’s body crumbled apart. The shattered remains vanished before hitting the cathedral floor, and Ryoko’s true body appeared, falling as if she had been blown back.

“That idiot!”

Washu’s irritated mutter was heard, and then a folding fan suddenly flew toward Mihoshi. Mihoshi dropped Ayeka and barely managed to catch the fan.

“What is this?”

When Mihoshi opened the fan, a stereotypical Rising Sun appeared.

“You don’t know? You use it like this.”

Washu snapped her own fan open and shouted at the top of her lungs.

“Go, go, Ryo-ko!”

This time, Mihoshi wiped out completely, resolving to revise her perception of the "Universe's Greatest Genius Scientist."

“Ugh...”

Ayeka regained consciousness amidst the commotion.

“Ayeka-san!”

Mihoshi rushed over and helped Ayeka up.

“I... why am I...”

Dazed, Ayeka looked back and forth between Mihoshi and the unfamiliar girl.

“Are you awake?”

The petite girl peered into Ayeka's face and smiled brightly.

"Where is this?"

Washu gave Mihoshi a wink and turned her back.

"I've decided to give only one lecture a day. Mihoshi-dono, you make sure to explain things properly!"

"No way..."

Mihoshi's eyes grew watery. This was because the mathematical formulas and geometric diagrams from earlier came flooding back into her head. Ayeka stared at Mihoshi with a puzzled face. Mihoshi let out a sigh and began to talk, explaining that this person was the universe's greatest genius scientist, Washu-san; that she was actually Kagato's teacher; that this was the Sub-Universe; and that while they could call people from the other side to this one, it was a one-way trip...

"It's Washu-chan!"

A sharp reprimand flew from the figure's back.

"...She's the genius scientist, Washu-chan..."

Mihoshi's shoulders slumped in defeat, but she obediently corrected herself nonetheless.

At that moment, just as green flames flickered, Kagato appeared before Washu's eyes.

"This is quite troublesome, Professor. Taking my experimental materials without permission."

"A shadow?"

Washu sent a cold gaze his way.

"Even I wouldn't be able to leave if I entered this place, after all."

Kagato wore a cold smile.

"I shall forgive you for Princess Ayeka. In exchange, perhaps you will join me for a small experiment."

Kagato glanced at the Ryoko on the screen. A pattern resembling a complex wiring diagram began to spread at Ryoko's feet. Ryoko's face contorted in pain, and she slumped to one knee.

"What did you do?!"

Washu's sharp voice rang out.

"I have directed all the energy flow from the gems toward the Soja."

Kagato searched Washu's face as if confirming the results.

"Just as you created Ryoko's energy system. Unfortunately, I couldn't make it as compact as Ryoko. Even so, the amount of energy that can be drawn out at once should be incomparable to hers."

When Kagato raised his hand, the space began to let out a low hum, as if resonating.

"Let me show you."

With his voice, a massive screen appeared.

"At this moment, energy is being charged from the gems into the main cannon. Can you see that planet, Princess Ayeka? The Professor and I are about to conduct a small experiment. Just like we used to do in the old days."

The screen showed a distant planet that looked like a blue jewel.

"Since I could not obtain your cooperation, I had no choice but to devise a second-best plan. After all, the only person left who seems capable of answering my questions is down there."

Kagato's form began to fade.

"St..."

Ayeka suddenly shook off Mihoshi's arm.

"Stop it!!"

Kagato's form vanished completely, and at the same moment, the main cannon was fired. The massive dragon of light trailed a long tail as it headed toward Earth. Then, light

began to gather in space, spreading its wings. The dragon of light struck the four wings, lost its shape, and began to be absorbed.

“Light Hawk Wings?!”

Ayeka’s eyes followed the wings as they turned back into particles of light and vanished.

“So it appeared after all. Even so, only the wings...?”

Kagato, having materialized in the cathedral, looked up at the screen and muttered. Suddenly, an impact shook the cathedral. Light appeared on the screen, and ten wings revealed their shape, spreading out like flower petals.

“Tsunami!!”

Kagato’s face glowed with joy.

“Beautiful... Is this the First Ship?”

“That is...”

The exhausted Ryoko, still lying on the floor, lifted her head. Most of the gems' energy had been sucked away by the Soja, and she no longer had the strength to stand.

“Ryoko.”

A shadow fell over her upturned face.

“Your role ends here as well.”

Kagato’s hand reached out, grabbed Ryoko’s head, and slowly lifted her into the air.

“Once your consciousness vanishes, the power of the gems will belong entirely to the Soja. Do not be afraid. For you shall become a part of my power.”

Terrific pressure was applied to Ryoko’s head. A streak of blood trickled down from beneath Kagato’s hand.

“I'm sorry... Tenchi...”

Ryoko’s consciousness began to fade. Then, at that moment, some powerful energy sent Kagato’s body flying back.

“Who is there?!”

In the slightly distant space, the figure of a boy holding Ryoko appeared.

“You are...”

“Tenchi-sama!!”

The three watching the screen in the Sub-Universe cried out in unison.

“To think you were alive, boy... no, Tenchi!”

As if answering Kagato’s words, guardians appeared on either side of Tenchi.

“Take care of Ryoko!”

Tenchi leveled the Tenchi-ken and made a great leap toward Kagato. In an instant, the descending sword stopped. Kagato’s bare hand had caught the blade of the Tenchi-ken.

“What?!”

Tenchi couldn't believe his eyes.

“So the remaining gems were here.”

Kagato’s gaze fell upon the hilt of the Tenchi-ken. Tenchi could feel the energy being drained from the gems through Kagato.

“Young man. You were too late. I discovered that I could convert the energy flow with my system. Even without these two gems, the system would have been completed. It was kind of you to go out of your way to deliver them to me.”

The energy flow accelerated. The flames of the gems flickered and started to go out. A shockwave was released from Kagato’s body, and Tenchi was blown back.

“Without the power of the gems, that sword is nothing more than a medium to draw out the ship's power. And all energy from the ship is currently being cut off within this neutralization field. Now, what will you do, boy?”

Kagato looked down at Tenchi mockingly.

“Damn it!”

Tenchi leveled his sword, but the light forming the blade flickered violently.

“Do you not realize it is futile?”

Before the words were even finished, Tenchi struck at Kagato again. However, he was easily parried, and his arm was seized instead.

“What is the matter, boy?”

Tenchi’s body was hoisted up.

“Playing the knight and coming to rescue the women? Why do you interfere with me? Do you not wish to see it? The moment the greatest mystery of the universe is unraveled.”

“People...”

Tenchi bit his lip at the pain that felt as if his arm would be torn off.

“What do you think human lives are?! Neither Ryoko nor Ayeka-san are your tools. Let go!”

“Lecturing me?”

Kagato’s lips twisted.

“How insolent for one without power!!”

Kagato slammed Tenchi against the cathedral wall. The shock caused Tenchi’s consciousness to momentarily fade.

“Tenchi!”

Ryoko screamed. All the energy of the gems was now gathered in Kagato.

“Enough... stop it now...”

She felt what little remained of her energy vanish just by speaking. Ryoko let her head hang dejectedly.

“Tsunami. The ship with the greatest energy in the universe.”

Looking up at the screen and spreading his arms as if to welcome her, an aura rose from Kagato’s body.

“Come to me. Offer that power into my hands.”

Suddenly, the ring binding his hair shattered, and his silver hair spread out like a living thing. A loud, triumphant laugh that seemed unable to contain its joy echoed through the cathedral.

“It's no use... I'm already...”

Tenchi’s field of vision was shrouded in darkness.

Chapter 17:

Sasami is inside Tsunami...

Sasami heard Kagato's laughter while inside Tsunami.

"The ship is being pulled in... I'm scared!"

Tsunami looked down at the Soja with a calm expression.

"It is alright. ...Believe in him."

With that serene voice, the fear suddenly receded.

"Tsunami?"

Sasami looked up. Tsunami wore a smile as if gazing into the far reaches of the universe.

"...Father and Mother of Heaven and Earth, in the true name of the Prince of Light, I make my prayer. Even now, show the path of light before Him..."

Tenchi was in the darkness. Leaning limply against the wall, his eyes open and vacant, he heard the mocking whispers in his heart. The whispers kept saying that he had lost. He had lost once again. He could no longer even save himself.

Kagato was now calling Tsunami to him. If Tsunami were swallowed by this Soja system, it would be the end. Tsunami's warm light would vanish, and only the energy of ruthless power would take the place of the truth of this universe. Neither he nor anyone else had the power to stop it...

Tenchi's heart froze in despair and sank into the darkness. Then, Ryoko's sad face flickered in his mind.

"Tenchi... enough... stop it now..."

I don't have any power left. I'm... not the kind of man you think I am...!

Despair turned into a flame of self-reproach that scorched his being, tormenting Tenchi. The image of Ryoko remained burned into his mind and would not leave.

If only I had even a little bit of power... If I could at least save Ryoko... It's the life my mother saved for me, but I don't care about it anymore.

For just a moment, his heart felt lighter.

“Tenchi...”

He felt as if he heard his mother’s nostalgic voice.

“Do not be afraid. Open your heart. Do not rely on the Tenchi-ken. Believe in your own... in your own power.”

Tenchi was startled. For a moment, it felt as though the voices of his mother, Achika, and Tsunami had overlapped.

“Tsunami?!”

Tenchi’s eyes were drawn away from the darkness. On the ship shown across the full screen, there was the serene figure of Tsunami. Tsunami had her hands together, and while she was looking at Tenchi, she was praying as if calling out to a far-distant existence.

“...Father and Mother of Heaven and Earth, in the true name of the Prince of Light, I make my prayer. Even now, show the path of light before Him...”

Though they were the words of Jurai, Tenchi felt them enter his heart directly, dispelling the darkness, giving him strength, and pointing the way.

I can see the light...

Tsunami’s light gathered in his hands and in the crest on his forehead... The light filled his entire body, just as it had when he woke up inside Tsunami. He felt as if the surface of the water in his heart was becoming clear.

Tenchi stood up quietly and let go of the Tenchi-ken. It made a dry *clatter* as it hit the floor. Kagato turned around and raised an eyebrow slightly upon seeing Tenchi. His gaze fell to the Tenchi-ken. Kagato furrowed his brows in suspicion.

“What is it, boy? Have you resigned yourself?”

Tenchi did not answer. Though he faced Kagato with his bare hands and no weapon, he felt no fear. Tsunami's words became light and filled his heart; Tenchi felt a strange sensation of being himself, yet simultaneously being Tsunami, and being a vessel for an even greater cosmic existence.

In Tenchi's eyes, a large shadow lurked behind Kagato. The energy Kagato was supposedly drawing in was passing right through him and simply vanishing into the shadow. Tenchi suddenly realized. This was not true power. Kagato had not noticed.

"What are you thinking?!"

Kagato's expression became grim. He sensed something bottomless in Tenchi's demeanor, different from before.

There are no openings... Is this the same boy who was crouching like a dazed fool just a moment ago?!

Kagato felt an instinctive fear at the sight of Tenchi, who was staring at him with bare hands without even taking a fighting stance, and he tried to force that feeling away.

What was there to fear? This boy had no power left. Kagato reached out his hand toward Tenchi as if to finish him off quickly.

"Stoooooop!!"

Ryoko's strained voice halted Kagato's movement.

"You should have everything you wanted by now... So, please, at least leave Tenchi..."

Tenchi's gaze wavered. He was clearly shaken. Kagato felt certain of his superiority once again. Irritated that he—who was now about to swallow Tsunami's power—had felt even a shred of fear, Kagato looked down at Ryoko.

"Pathetic..."

Ryoko was crawling on the floor like an insect, yet she still desperately reached her hand toward Tenchi.

"Was this boy so important to you? Rest easy. I shall let you and Princess Ayeka follow after him shortly. So that this boy will not be lonely."

As he spoke, Kagato felt the energy rising within himself. Kagato turned back to Tenchi with an expression that could almost be taken as gentle and leveled his hand. An instant later, a shockwave far more devastating than anything before was unleashed.

“Tenchiiiii!!”

Ryoko’s scream echoed through the cathedral.

It is over, Kagato thought. This boy had troubled him until the very end, but in the end, he was just a worthless pebble, same as Ryoko. Kagato started to turn back toward Tsunami. Tenchi was no longer even in his thoughts.

But then, a figure caught the edge of his vision. Three lights floated through the smoke of the explosion.

“It cannot be...”

A voiceless mutter escaped Kagato’s lips. As the smoke cleared, he saw Tenchi standing there, unharmed. His body was protected by three Light Hawk Wings, and he seemed to be glowing with his own light.

“Light Hawk Wings?!”

Impossible! Power from the ship should be completely cut off... The thought that such a thing was impossible was too strong. As a scientist, and as one who possessed great power himself, Kagato rejected the Tenchi before him.

It was just as Kagato leveled both hands to attack again. Tenchi thrust both of his hands forward in the exact same way.

Kagato instinctively braced himself.

Suddenly, the crest on Tenchi’s forehead emitted a powerful light, and two Wings of the Light Hawk passed through his body as if to protect him.

Tenchi’s appearance changed. The Wings of the Light Hawk transformed into the ancient armor of the Juraian Royal Family, enveloping his body. Furthermore, the remaining wing reshaped itself into a blade of light, settling firmly into Tenchi’s hand.

"Matter conversion!?"

Did this mean the boy had manipulated the Wings of the Light Hawk and changed them into whatever form he desired? Kagato realized he was being exposed to a threat he had never imagined.

This boy was an enemy! No matter how much this place functioned as an energy neutralization field, the energy of the Wings of the Light Hawk was an unknown variable. That power might even destroy the field itself.

Kagato instinctively threw up his arms and slammed a shockwave toward Tenchi. To his surprise, the sword of light transformed into a shield in front of Tenchi, easily parrying the attack.

"Tch!"

Behind Kagato, Guard Crystals rose one after another, pointing their sharp tips toward Tenchi before being unleashed. In his desperate craving for Tsunami's power, Kagato had nothing on his mind except defeating the enemy before him.

Seeing Tenchi flinch, Kagato used spatial teleportation.

"How careless!!"

The Guard Crystals had been a decoy—a rudimentary tactic. Kagato appeared suddenly in the immediate vicinity of Tenchi, who still held his shield, and swung his greatsword upward.

"I have you!"

Kagato swung the greatsword down with all his might toward Tenchi, who had only just managed to ready his sword of light... the Light Hawk Sword.

He felt the impact. The greatsword sliced through the armor and bit into Tenchi's shoulder; for a moment, Tenchi's expression twisted in pain. Simultaneously, an unbelievable surge of agony struck Kagato.

The greatsword shattered into pieces.

Tenchi's Light Hawk Sword had pierced Kagato's body. The Light Hawk Sword destroyed the molecules composing Kagato's life force and severed the threads that formed his visible physical manifestation.

Kagato's form wavered slightly.

Silence enveloped the cathedral. Kagato and Tenchi stood back-to-back, as if frozen in time. A moment later, Kagato's body began to crumble like sand.

"Regeneration is not working..."

A murmur leaked from his lips.

"So this was your power..."

Tenchi turned around as if snapping back to his senses.

Kagato was smiling. At the moment he realized his death, he understood. This power—this technique the boy had manifested—was the very thing he had sought as the universe's greatest mystery: the material conversion of energy.

His own death no longer mattered. This was because his spirit had finally grasped the truth.

Kagato thought to himself: *Though I have lost my physical form, my consciousness will surely fly away in search of this light and the source of power behind it.*

"Wonderful..."

Kagato turned a guileless smile toward him.

"It is my loss... young man."

Kagato's form wavered violently, and in the blink of an eye, he turned to dust and vanished.

Afterward, this story could have ended as a legend. However, the cheers of five women ruined the grand ending.

"Tenchi!" "Lord Tenchi!" "Tenchi-san!" "Master Tenchi!" "Big brother Tenchi!"

The seal Kagato had placed was broken. Ryoko, Ayeka, Mihoshi, and then Washu—along with Sasami, who had been sent by Tsunami—surrounded Tenchi.

"Lord Tenchi, I am so glad you are safe..."

Ayeka pushed Ryoko aside—or rather, to her, it likely didn't even register as a push—and clung to Tenchi, breaking down into tears.

"Big brother Tenchi! Sasami was so scared!"

"Meow, meow, meow!!"

Sasami, and for some reason even Ryo-Ohki, clung to Tenchi and began to cry.

"Sa-Sasami!?"

Though bewildered, Tenchi gently stroked Sasami’s head.

"Oh, Tenchi-san, oh my..."

Mihoshi, having had both of Tenchi's sides occupied by the Jurai sisters, clung to his leg. Inappropriately, she rubbed her cheek against his knee while pouring tears onto his feet.

"Master Tenchi, nice to meet you. I’m Ryoko’s mother and the greatest scientific genius in the universe, Little Washu! I have a quick favor to ask—would you like to become my guinea pig?"

It was Washu who was cheerfully pitching herself from above Mihoshi’s head.

Tenchi looked around and sighed.

"Um..."

The Wings of the Light Hawk had already vanished, and he had returned to being a timid high schooler.

"How am I supposed to get home?"

No one was listening to his words.

"Hey..."

Ryoko, who had been shoved out alone, trembled with anger.

"Hey, what is this..."

No one answered Ryoko’s call.

"Wait a minute. Everyone, leaving me aside like this..."

This is horrible!!

Ryoko’s eyes welled with tears.

"HEY—!!"

Ryoko’s scream echoed through the cathedral. Suddenly, the center of the cathedral shifted. The world split in two.

"Eh!?"

The faces of Ayeka, Sasami, Mihoshi, Washu, and Tenchi froze.

Far above the Masaki Shrine, an explosion like a supernova was observed. Katsuhito, who had already received information from Tsunami through Funaho, looked up at the night sky and whispered with deep emotion.

"Tenchi! You must come back alive."

Ultimately, it was Ryo-Ohki who saved the one hero and five women. Looking at the Soja, which was receding into the distance while split in half, Tenchi sat in Ryo-Ohki's bridge amidst the jumble of Ayeka and the others. He thought blankly to himself.

"What on earth did I do!?"

"To think even the ship was split in two."

Washu muttered, her crab-like red hair standing on end.

"That power... I’m getting more and more interested."

Washu smiled brightly and sidled up to Tenchi.

"Master Tenchi. Why don't you leave that body of yours to Little Washu? Don't worry, it won't hurt."

Tenchi instinctively shuddered and backed away.

The blue horizon drew near, and the familiar—though partially destroyed—Seto Ohashi Bridge came into view. Ryo-Ohki suddenly turned and flew off toward the Masaki Shrine.

Thus, Tenchi and the five women returned to their home.

It was a truly celebratory occasion for us, for Katsuhito who was looking up at the night sky from the shrine grounds, and for Nobuyuki who had just returned from work.

Tenchi's story did not become a legend; instead, it happily signaled a new beginning here once more.

Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki: The Impermanence of All Things [End]

Afterword

I bring you the third volume of *Tenchi Muyo!*

The story of the first OVA series has finally concluded here. To all the readers who have patiently stayed with me since the first volume, thank you very much.

Anyway, until this second half was finished, I felt like I had no connection to peaceful days... Because of that, the author is currently feeling a bit burnt out, cleaning the house—which had become like Mihoshi's private room—and playing with my daughter.

(But I'll confess now: while writing this book, I started a certain famous RPG and finished it all the way to the ending before I finished writing. Mr. M, I'm sorry!)

Since I started this as a novelization of the main story, this second volume follows almost the same structure as the OVA, just like the first volume. However, I put a bit of extra emotion into the parts involving Tenchi's mother, Achika.

Even so, Tenchi-kun is so lucky to be loved by everyone like this. Even if you discount the fact that he's an only child and a prince of the Juraian Royal Family (well, that just means he has a lot of hardships), he has the kind of luck equivalent to winning the jackpot in a lottery.

It's just that he doesn't think so himself; on the contrary, he is convinced he is the most unfortunate person in the universe! Whether that's pitiful or just his particular brand of misfortune...

Now, as for the next story—yes! It's a serialized story. One day, the unhappy (happy?) Tenchi-kun thinks to himself:

"I've had enough! I can't stand this life anymore...! I'm a man, too. From now on, I'm going to live exactly the way I want!!"

And then, Tenchi puts his words into action. What exactly are those words...!?

By the way, the TV adaptation I mentioned briefly in the afterword of the first volume seems to be progressing steadily. The members of the Masaki household appearing on TV might not be in the distant future, but the near future?

Of course, the second OVA series is also in progress. At this point, it feels like stories are giving birth to more stories, multiplying like Crystal Ryo-Ohki. As an author involved in the *Tenchi* story, I can't help but be genuinely happy. "Ah, I get to see a new story again," I think.

I'm not usually the type to listen to music while working (as my attention tends to drift toward it), but this time I occasionally listened to Celtic music CDs. The world of *Tenchi* is Japanese-style, but I found myself thinking that the grand world lying beneath it might share a common thread with the heroic myths and legends of the Celts...

Well then, following the first volume, I owe a great deal of thanks to Mr. M for his help with this second volume. May happiness like Tenchi-kun's come your way.

And to all the readers: please continue to support *Tenchi* as it journeys toward new horizons. Let's meet next time in the pages of *Dragon Magazine*.

Just before the height of summer, **Naoko Hasegawa**